
COTTON CAMPAIGN

END FORCED LABOR IN CENTRAL ASIA

October 24, 2016

Thomas A. Shannon, Jr.
Under Secretary for Political Affairs
United States Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Under Secretary Shannon:

In light of your current visit to Central Asia, we write to urge you to reinforce the U.S. government's efforts related to the ongoing issue of forced labor in Uzbekistan cotton sector.

As you may know, the Cotton Campaign is an international, multi-stakeholder coalition of NGOs, trade unions, apparel brands, and socially responsible investors dedicated to ending the use of state-sponsored forced labor in Uzbekistan's cotton sector.

We greatly appreciate the State Department's recent decision to downgrade Uzbekistan to a Tier 3 country in its 2016 Trafficking in Persons Report. We are closely following this fall's cotton harvest and have received credible reports from independent monitors on the ground that the problem of forced labor remains pervasive and cases of forced child labor persist. In addition, independent civil society activists and journalists seeking to report on the harvest have been arbitrarily detained, harassed and arrested.

In September 2016, the Cotton Campaign published the enclosed public letter, urging the new Uzbek government to seize the opportunity presented by the transition to engage constructively with the international community to end forced labor in its Soviet-era, state-run cotton production system.

We understand that you have many other human rights issues on the agenda with Uzbekistan, but we urge you to send a firm message to the government of Uzbekistan to seize this historic opportunity to end forced labor in its cotton sector.

Sincerely,

The Cotton Campaign:

Bennett Freeman – Cotton Campaign Steering Committee, former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State,
Democracy, Human Rights and Labor
Judy Gearhart – International Labor Rights Forum, Executive Committee
Umida Niyazova – Uzbek-German Forum on Human Rights

[ABOUT](#)[STAKEHOLDERS](#)[TAKE ACTION](#)[MEDIA](#)[HARVEST 2016](#)

After Karimov, What's Next?

After Karimov, What's Next?

Cotton Campaign urges successors to end state-sponsored forced labor & cotton crimes in Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan's President for the past 27 years, Islam Karimov, passed away earlier this month, potentially opening the door to a new era for Central Asia's most populous country. Emerging leaders in Uzbekistan have an opportunity to now engage constructively with the international community and build on recent developments initiated under Karimov by ending the use of forced labor in the country's cotton sector.

"We hope Uzbekistan's new leaders can begin to engage independent human rights monitors and finally put a full stop to the systemic use of forced labor, which has led dozens of global brands to avoid buying Uzbek cotton," said Judy Gearhart, Executive Director of the International Labor Rights Forum, a founding member of the global Cotton Campaign.

The old regime relied heavily on a state-run system of forced labor in the country's cotton export sector. Positive engagement started in 2014, when the Uzbek government signed a Decent Work Country Programme with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and adopted a National Action Plan to eliminate child labor and focus on improving work and employment conditions in agriculture, including cotton.

The 2014 agreement came after seven years of advocacy by the Cotton Campaign, an international, multi-stakeholder coalition of NGOs, trade unions, apparel brands, trade associations and investors, which has advocated for reforms in Uzbekistan. It estimates that more than one million citizens' rights are violated each year when they are forced to grow and harvest cotton.

Despite the 2014 agreement and a significant reduction in the use of child labor – though not adult forced

CONTACT: Cotton Campaign Coordinator - C/O International Labor Rights Forum, 1634 Eye Street NW, Suite 1001, Washington, DC 20006. +1(202) 347-4100, cottoncampaigncoordinator [at] gmail.com

labor – the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights (UGF) documented cases just last month of the government forcibly mobilizing public employees from the healthcare and education sectors, as well as university students, farmers and business owners to fulfill harvest quotas.

“By forcing teachers, doctors and students to work in cotton fields, the state undermines the well-being of citizens, harms public health and deteriorates the quality of education of school and university students,” said Umida Niyazova, director of the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights. UGF’s most recent Chronicle of Forced Labor in Uzbekistan from September 2016 documents numerous cases of forced labor in connection with the impending cotton harvest in Uzbekistan.

Dimitry Tikhonov, whose home office was burned down in 2015 while he was documenting the continued use of forced labor in the cotton harvest, noted: “Real signs of change indicating Uzbek authorities will stop cotton crimes would be evidenced through ceasing harassment and instead beginning dialogue with independent Uzbek human rights activists, dropping bogus charges against those of us who were forced into exile and allowing unfettered access for independent monitoring during the 2016 cotton harvest.”

The Cotton Campaign urges Acting President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev to end cotton crimes as the country charts its new path, by taking the following actions:

1. Enforce national laws that prohibit the use of forced and child labor in alignment with ratified ILO conventions
2. Make public, high-level policy statements condemning forced labor, specifically including forced labor in the cotton sector, and making clear that all work should be voluntary and fairly compensated
3. Instruct government officials at all levels and citizens that act on behalf of the government to reject coercion as mechanism for labor mobilization
4. Prosecute, in conformance with international standards, government officials accused of forcing citizens to pick cotton, with penalties that reflect the severity of the crime and which serve as a deterrent for future crimes
5. Allow independent journalists, human rights defenders and other individuals and organizations to document and report concerns about the use of forced labor without fear of reprisals
6. Ratify and implement ILO Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize
7. Initiate a time-bound plan to reform root causes of forced labor in the agriculture sector.

“The Uzbek government has a historic opportunity to reform its cotton production system and curtail Soviet-era forced labor by taking these steps in the coming weeks and months,” said Bennett Freeman, a co-founder of the Cotton Campaign and former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor.