

For Immediate Release

Uzbekistan: ILO Report Confirms Forced Labor

But Government Role Undermined Research

(Washington, DC - February 16, 2017) A recent report by the International Labor Organization (ILO) confirms the scope and systematic nature of forced labor of Uzbek citizens during Uzbekistan's 2016 cotton harvest, the Cotton Campaign said today. But the Uzbek government's involvement in the research appeared to undermine the results, and may also have led the ILO to not give sufficient weight to the evidence of abuses presented by independent Uzbek civil society monitors.

The ILO found that “sustainable elimination of the risk of child and forced labor remains a prominent issue” in Uzbekistan, and concludes that about one third of the 2.8 million cotton pickers that the ILO estimates are involved in the annual cotton harvest were “non-voluntary.” The figure is in line with Cotton Campaign estimates of the size of the population of forced laborers. Many of the ILO's findings on forced labor correspond to evidence collected by independent Uzbek monitors on the ground. But the involvement of government officials in the organization's research and other possible government pressure appears to have led to some efforts to downplay the scope and severity of forced labor throughout the country, for example by the report's use of terms such as “non-voluntary” or “reluctant” to describe forced laborers, the Cotton Campaign said.

“The government of Uzbekistan uses a mass, forced mobilization of citizens to harvest cotton every year,” said Umida Niyazova, director of the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights (UGF), which monitors labor and human rights in Uzbekistan relying on a network of activists across the country. “People are made to harvest cotton under threat of losing their livelihoods, their education or social benefits to which they are entitled, and upon which they depend.”

The Cotton Campaign, a coalition of human rights, labor, investor and business organizations, including human rights groups from Uzbekistan, estimates that more than 1 million Uzbek citizens are forced by Uzbek authorities to harvest cotton annually, in often abusive conditions and on threat of punishment. Responding to ongoing reports of forced and child labor in Uzbekistan's cotton sector, the ILO monitored labor conditions during the country's 2016 harvest in two phases, pre-harvest in late July and early August, and during the harvest from mid-September through the end of October.

But the ILO conducted its survey in conjunction with Uzbek union officials aligned with the government, undermining the credibility of its conclusions. Forced laborers and farmers were required to answer questions in the presence of officials from the government-controlled Federation of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan (FTUU), denying respondents confidentiality or anonymity, despite Uzbekistan's well-known and pervasive system of surveillance, repression, and retaliation for criticism of the government.

The ILO noted in its report that, “many interviewees appeared to have been briefed in advance.” Independent Uzbek monitors also confirmed that local administrators coached people on what to say when questioned by ILO monitors.

The FTUU chair was appointed by the government after the previous chair became deputy prime minister. The union was tasked by the Uzbek government with ensuring control over the cotton-pickers in a protocol issued by Uzbekistan’s Cabinet of Ministers in July 2016, which detailed an order to deploy all medical and educational staff to pick cotton.

The findings in the ILO report also demonstrate how businesses with Uzbek cotton in their supply chains, or organizations supporting projects in Uzbekistan’s agricultural sector, risk their own reputations by being associated with the state-run forced labor system.

The ILO report documented that institutions of higher education across the country were essentially closed so that Uzbek students could be mobilized to pick cotton for an entire month. It further noted that, “given the dependency of students on the authorities who participate in the recruitment, the real extent of voluntariness is unclear.”

The ILO found as well that public and private organizations were forced to mobilize staff or, in some cases, pay to have staff excluded from cotton picking. It found that school officials, employers, and state organs were involved in recruiting labor for the harvest, that nearly all cotton pickers were recruited by one of these “intermediaries,” and that many who harvest cotton do so because, “recruitment is effectively carried out by those on whom they depend for their primary income or education.”

Independent Uzbek civil society monitors also documented in their [preliminary findings](#) ample evidence of continued government-led forced labor. The ILO report confirmed some of these findings:

- Independent monitors documented forced labor of children and adults in areas of the country with projects financed/ administered by the World Bank. The ILO conclusions found no evidence of force labor in World Bank project areas, but stated that World Bank project areas “share similar risks” of forced labor as other regions of Uzbekistan because they are not excluded from the national system of coerced labor recruitment.
- Government-led campaigns to raise awareness about and end forced and child labor were insufficient. Independent Uzbek civil society monitors demonstrated that people the ILO interviewed were afraid to report incidents of forced labor, and told independent monitors that the SMS and banner campaigns on labor rights were, “not for us,” because they were still told they would lose their jobs or be expelled if they didn’t participate. The ILO report also documented the limitations of awareness raising efforts, noting that awareness-raising messages were, “submerged by cotton harvest recruitment campaigns”.
- Independent monitors documented cases in which students were expelled for refusing to participate, and at least one teacher was fired for refusing to harvest cotton. The ILO

found that recruiters were often people with authority over the cotton picker -- an employer or school administrator in many cases.

The ILO report did not touch on another aspect of the forced labor situation, however—that human rights activists and journalists were repeatedly arrested and harassed by local authorities for their attempts to document cotton harvest.

The ILO should ensure its site visits are free from interference by the government and insist that Uzbek citizens who monitor conditions in the fields are free from retaliation, arbitrary detention, or other abuses, the Cotton Campaign said.

“The death of Uzbekistan’s autocratic leader, Islam Karimov, last August and the election to the presidency of Shavkat Mirziyoyev in December have not translated into meaningful human rights improvements on the ground,” said Steve Swerdlow, Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The ILO report’s findings are clearly not the whole story when human rights activists who monitor the cotton harvest suffer brutal attacks and harassment.”

For more reporting by the Uzbek-German Forum on cotton and forced labor in Uzbekistan, see: <http://uzbekgermanforum.org/>

For more reporting by Human Rights Watch on Uzbekistan, see: <https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/uzbekistan>

For more information on the Cotton Campaign, see: www.cottoncampaign.org