Summary of Key Findings: Uzbek Government used forced labor to prepare cotton fields in 2015

The government of Uzbekistan forced an estimated 500,000 people to weed cotton fields between April and August 2015. The Uzbek Prime Minister issued orders to mobilize people to the cotton fields, calling for a “war against weeds.” Regional and district officials translated the message into specific orders for each institution within their jurisdiction, and administrators of public-sector institutions sent employees in groups to clear the cotton fields, under threat of losing their jobs. The government mobilized more education and healthcare workers than any other sector, primarily from rural areas of the country.

Methodology

This report presents findings of field research by the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights (UGF), which monitored labor practices in the Jizzak, Karakalpakstan, Kashkadarya, Syrdarya and Tashkent regions of Uzbekistan throughout the first half of 2015. UGF monitors received extensive training on research methodology by an expert in labor law. Throughout the spring, they observed mobilization meetings; visited the cotton fields, schools, hospitals and other institutions; surveyed employees of these institutions; photographed the mobilization of citizens to the cotton fields; and conducted 80 interviews of people of diverse ages, professions and geographic locations. Monitors’ geographic scope included project areas of the World Bank, which has committed to suspend loans if there is forced labor in its project areas, such as the Karakalpakstan districts Beruni and Eilikkala and Tashkent region.

State-Orchestrated Forced Labor in the Cotton Sector of Uzbekistan April - July 2015

The Uzbek government forcibly mobilized approximately 500,000 people to weed cotton fields, starting in April in Andijan and early May in other regions and concluding in early August. The number of forced labor victims was substantially lower than during the cotton harvest because fewer hands are needed to weed the fields than to pick the cotton.

The public-sector workers reported that officials presented refusal as political opposition to the government. Therefore, no one ordered to weed the fields refused, fearing not only job loss but also being blacklisted from future employment and having no recourse in the courts.

The Uzbek government appeared to target rural and poorer populations to mobilize for weeding the cotton fields. Officials did not send employees from institutions based in the capital Tashkent, and exemptions from field work were only an option for those with sufficient income to pay for them.

1 Average monthly salaries in Uzbekistan: for doctors 700,000 – 800,000 soum ($156 - $178), teachers 500,000 – 600,000 soum ($111 - $133), nurses 300,000 – 350,000 soum ($67 - $78), and janitors 250,000 ($56).
The Central Government Ordered Mobilization to the Cotton Fields

The forced mobilization of Uzbek citizens to weed the cotton fields began with orders from the central government in the capital Tashkent. Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev convened a meeting in early May with regional and district governors (hokims) and farmers. Participating farmers reported that the Prime Minister called for a “war on weeds” and ordered the regional and district officials to organize people to weed the cotton fields in their respective regions and districts.

Regional and district-level governors allocated farm land in their regions and districts to the public-sector institutions within their jurisdictions, according to the number of employees at each institution. Allocations varied across regions and institutions. For example, officials ordered a rural school with 28 employees to weed 300 hectares of cotton farm land; ordered a rural health clinic with one doctor, two nurses and one technician to weed 3 hectares; and ordered Angren College with 50 employees to weed 12 hectares.

Public-sector workers sent to weed the cotton fields reported that at meetings, their administrators stated “by order of the governor” or a particular local official, but no one provided them with such a written order. Many of the public sector workers reported that their administrators included offers to purchase exemptions from the field work, also under apparent orders from the local officials.

In some cases, officials publicly oversaw the mobilization as well. Residents of Buki district, Tashkent region reported that the district governor Davron Sultanov managed the daily departures to the cotton fields, at 7:00 AM from the district headquarters (“hokimiyat”).

Photos: Personnel of Jizzak regional Diagnostic Center en route to weed the cotton field
Field Work Conditions

Periods of work in the fields varied across regions. In Karakalpakstan, officials sent public sector workers for shifts of 10 to 15 days, and the workers stayed near the fields. In Jizzak, Syrdarya and Tashkent regions, officials sent employees 1 to 2 weekdays per week and every weekend, for a total of 10 – 15 days per month per employee.

A teacher from Syrdarya region reported,

“We arrived at the field between 5 and 6 AM, trying to start before the heat. We worked until 11, then had lunch. The farmer brought us water, and we brought food from home. After a break for 1 – 2 hours, we then worked until 5 PM. Then we walked home, about 4 kilometers. The weeding work cost me. I spent 120,000 soums (approx. $45) for food and water during my 10 – day shift.”

The Uzbek government did not pay any of the people sent to weed cotton fields for their field work in 2015. For the shifts weeding cotton fields that fell on regular workdays, the public-sector workers continued to receive their regular pay. For shifts that fell on regular days off, nothing. School and hospital administrators in particular ordered their employees to work during scheduled days off, typically weekends.

A doctor in Syrdarya region reported,

“Are you asking whether they pay us? We are always ready for free labor. During the cotton harvest, there is a little pay, but for weeding, no pay, no. Farmers have no money to pay. They are poor, and the state does not provide them money for weeding, so what are they to do?”

Furthermore, the public sector workers had to pay out of pocket for travel and meal expenses. Thus, the citizens of Uzbekistan once again were forced to subsidize the government to cultivate its white gold.
Impacts on Access to Education and Health Care

The government forcibly mobilized between 10% and 30% of public sector workers from primarily rural schools, colleges, hospitals and medical clinics to weed the cotton fields. The administrators of education and health care institutions sent workers typically during regularly scheduled days off, and assigned the work of employees sent to the fields to the staff that stayed behind.

A nurse in Jizzak region reported,

“Our hospital has 12 doctors and 60 nurses. In May, our chief physician brought all of us in and told us we must go to the cotton fields. One nurse was left to work in the hospital every day for those two months.”

Administrators of medical facilities in Angren, Tashkent region began sending staff to the cotton fields May 10, reportedly on orders from the Angren city mayor. The health care workers had the options of weeding cotton fields for 10 days or paying for exemptions, 1,000 ($0.30) per day per person.

In Jizzak region, a nurse described how she and her colleagues managed:

“In our Department, we have two doctors, five nurses, two janitors and a building superintendent, ten employees. We suggested that we work on one farm and each person weed one hectare. Two doctors decided they would not work in the fields and needed one nurse, but we had to weed 10 hectares altogether. So the rest of us went to the field, although our superintendent, an elderly woman, sent her 17-year old granddaughter in her place.”

In the Akhangaran and Beech districts of Tashkent, hospital administrators sent workers to the fields between night shifts at the hospitals.

District-level officials and representatives of the education ministry assigned an average of 10 – 15 hectares to each school, college and university. Teachers reported that their administrators sent maintenance staff during school days and teachers during weekends yet still had to reduce lessons in the classrooms. The weeding work coincided with scheduled exams in schools, so administrators required the teachers who proctored exams to pay for exemptions from the field work.

Administrators of the Bukinskogo district of Tashkent region sent 10 staff from each school during weekdays and all staff each weekend. The Bukinskogo teachers reported that they endured because they cannot afford to lose their jobs.

A college teacher in Syrdarya region reported,

“About 30% of our workers were sent. All the male employees go. The remaining
teachers have to give the lessons of those sent to the fields, but this means teachers who don’t know the subject are teaching it. The students generally stopped coming to class, because classes just didn’t happen.”

At the Jizzak Pedagogical University, teachers extorted funds from the students, and the administrator gave the students’ money to farmers to hire workers to weed the fields. As a university employee described,

“They assigned our institute 800 hectares of land to weed. The deans of our 10 faculties divided up the work among their departments. Then the teachers selected the students and told them that if they wanted to pass their exams, they would go weed for 10 days or pay a fee. The students paid.”

**Extortion by Government Officials was Widespread**

Most administrators of public institutions offered exemptions from weeding the cotton fields to their employees for purchase. The cost of exemptions ranged from a few dollars to $100 dollars for the weeding season. University students reported requirements to pay for exemptions, and teachers and nurses reported paying 100,000 – 150,000 soums (approx. $38 – 56) to avoid weeding entirely.

Administrators of large institutions were the most likely to extort exemption payments from their employees, perhaps because small contributions from each member of their large work forces added up substantially. Administrators of the state-owned Almalyk Mining and Metallurgical Company charged each of its workers approximately $2 for the weeding season. Of the 700 employees of the Angren oil depot, 6 weeded cotton fields and the rest paid for exemptions, providing the administrators 6 million soums ($2,000 USD).

**Officials in Karakalpakstan forced public and private sectors and welfare recipients to contribute**

The officials of the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan forced public- and private-sector institutions as well as recipients of social welfare to contribute to the weeding work.

Starting May 10, administrators of education and medical institutions sent employees to weed the cotton fields for shifts of 10 – 15 days. Additionally, local officials demanded payments from business owners. Businessmen from four different markets in Karakalpakstan reported that the market administrators charged them approximately $5 every 10 days throughout the weeding season, purportedly to hire workers to do the field work. Furthermore, neighborhood committees (“mahallas”) collected 50,000 soum (approx. $19) from each family receiving social welfare payments.

A nurse from the Central Hospital of Ellikkala district reported,

“They began to send us to weed the fields May 10. The first shift was 40 people for 15 days. Additionally, every day buses took the night shift workers, about 30 each day, to the fields. About 20% of our nurses were in the cotton fields. The doctors hired workers instead, paying 200,000 soums (approx. $77) each. I have no money, so I went and weeded. For 15 days I left my two children and my mother. Nobody cares that you leave your children.”
In Kashkadarya, poverty appeared to trump the system

In Kashkadarya, residents reported that the government did not forcibly mobilize residents to weed the cotton fields, apparently due to the extreme levels of poverty endured by the local population. Residents of Kashkadarya worked to weed the fields voluntarily, but not for pay, because the farmers could not offer any. Instead, local residents weeded the fields in exchange for cotton stalks, used for fires and livestock feed.

Teachers Demand Justice

Teachers of the Akhangaran district of Tashkent region published a letter to Uzbek President Islam Karimov on June 1, 2015, with the following message:

“Dear President:

The weeding of cotton fields has begun. The mayor of Akhangaran District ordered 160 people from the 59 schools and 21 kindergartens to the cotton fields. Regional head of the Ministry of Education ordered administrators to send 15 workers from each of the 885 schools and kindergartens in the region. Not even the largest schools have sufficient staff. Teachers who do not want to spend 10 days and nights in the cotton fields must pay the administrators 150,000 – 200,000 soums (approx. $58 – $77).

The teachers of our country are ready for any work. We participate in weeding and harvesting. We garden and clean public spaces. We don’t complain about it. We only ask to verify the legality and social justice in the national education system and rest of our society.”

The Uzbek government has repressed fundamental rights of association, freedom of press, and due process throughout its twenty-five year history and shown no signs of reforming. Prior to the mobilization to weed cotton fields, the government arrested, detained, and deported Andre Mrost, an international labor rights consultant. At the time of his arrest, Mr. Mrost was discussing ILO conventions with members of Ezgulik, the only human rights organization officially registered by the Uzbek government. On May 31, Uzbek authorities arrested and brutalized Elena Urlaeva, head of the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan, as she was documenting government-orchestrated forced labor in the cotton fields. On the day of her arrest, Ms. Urlaeva documented the Uzbek government’s forced mobilization of teachers and doctors to clear weeds from cotton fields near the city of Chinaz in Tashkent region. On August 16, police in Tashkent attacked, kicked, arrested, and detained Ms. Urlaeva for seven hours, during which they confiscated 200 pamphlets that explained national laws prohibiting forced labor.

In this context, the teachers’ letter and demand for accountability under the law is an extraordinary act of courage. It also may give the government pause over its decision to increase its use of adult forced labor to replace its previous mass use of forced child labor.
