

# FORCED LABOR IN UZBEKISTAN'S COTTON SECTOR

## Preliminary Findings from the 2016 Harvest

December 2016



*University students, October 31, still on the fields.*

The Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights (UGF) is writing to raise serious concerns about ongoing child labor, including an increase in government mobilization of schoolchildren aged 14 and 15, and systematic mass adult forced labor in Uzbekistan's cotton sector in 2016. In light of these findings, we call on the Members of the European Parliament to convene hearings with experts and civil society representatives who can provide evidence on the use of child and forced labor in Uzbekistan for analysis and consideration in advance of voting on the EU-Uzbekistan Textile Protocol. We also urge the European Parliament to articulate clear, measurable benchmarks on forced labor that Uzbekistan must meet to enable ratification of the Protocol.

In autumn 2016, the government ordered the mass mobilization of public sector workers, students, people receiving public benefits, and employees of public and private companies to pick cotton or to pay for replacement workers to pick cotton. In 2015, we estimated that the government forced more than one million people to pick cotton. While the findings presented here are preliminary, the pattern and scale of mobilization remained the same in 2016, resulting in massive forced labor, affecting more than a million people.<sup>1</sup> The findings presented here are based on interviews with more than 250 students and employees of various public sector institutions involved in the cotton harvest, 50 letters, messages and audio and video recordings sent to UGF by people mobilized to pick cotton, and review of more than 100 articles on the harvest in independent and local media outlets.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed explanation of this estimate, see: "The Cover-Up: Whitewashing Uzbekistan's White Gold," p. 20, Uzbek German Forum for Human Rights, March 2016, available at: <http://harvestreport2015.uzbekgermanforum.org>.

<sup>2</sup> For more information see: [harvestreport.uzbekgermanforum.org](http://harvestreport.uzbekgermanforum.org).

Uzbekistan undertook meaningful steps to end the widespread and systematic use of child labor in 2012 and 2013. These significant developments occurred only after sustained international pressure, including the EU's deferral of the textile protocol in December 2011. Since then, the government has increased engagement with the International Labor Organization (ILO) through the Decent Work Country Program and through its commitments to the World Bank to undertake monitoring and mitigation measures in recognition of the serious risk of child and forced labor in Bank-funded project areas.<sup>3</sup> In October 2016 Uzbekistan also ratified ILO Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association.

However, despite these steps, child labor has remained a persistent problem in Uzbekistan. UGF's 2016 monitoring documented an increase in instances of child labor from the last two years. We found child labor used widely in at least two regions in Uzbekistan and sporadic cases in other regions. We interviewed children and teachers from more than ten schools in two regions that sent children in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades (14 and 15 years old) to pick cotton for several weeks at the direction of local government officials. In other cases we found schools that sent children from the 5<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> grades (ages 11-14). The increase in documented cases of child labor underscores the urgent need to achieve real, durable reform in Uzbekistan's cotton sector to end all forms of forced labor.

While UGF believes that the ILO has a vital role to play in Uzbekistan, the government's expanded engagement with the ILO has not resulted in changes in labor practices on the ground. For the last three years, the government has not taken any substantive steps to end or reduce adult forced labor in Uzbekistan, except by increasing the number of adults forced to participate in the harvest to offset the reduction in child labor. The end of system-wide child labor underscored that the government, which maintains total control of the cotton sector, has the power to implement sweeping reforms to its labor practices. Therefore, we strongly urge you to consider information from the 2016 harvest before voting on ratification of the EU-Uzbekistan Textile Protocol, and to defer ratification until the government ends forced child and adult labor in cotton production, including through ending forced mobilization of schoolchildren, students, and public sector employees.

## **FORCED LABOR IN THE 2016 HARVEST**

The harvest began in early September and lasted until early November, with some students and public sector workers remaining in the fields until mid-November. The government imposed quotas for both labor and amount of cotton picked on institutions, which passed them on to their students or employees and enforced them through coercion and threats of penalty. For most people the picking quota in 2016 was 60-80 kilograms per day early in the season, 40-60 kilograms in the middle of the season, and declining to 10-20 kilograms toward the end.

### **Child Labor**

UGF monitors in 2016 documented more child labor cases in 2016 than in the previous two years, including cases where government institutions such as schools and colleges mobilized children to work, as well as cases where children accompanied their parents to the fields. We found organized mobilization of schoolchildren from rural schools in at least two regions, Kashkadarya and Karakalpakstan, and sporadic child labor in other regions. For example:

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed description of World Bank and ILO engagement in Uzbekistan, including monitoring and mitigation measures, see: "The Cover-Up: Whitewashing Uzbekistan's White Gold," ILO and World Bank Engagement in Uzbekistan, Uzbek German Forum for Human Rights, March 2016, available at: <http://harvestreport2015.uzbekgermanforum.org/?chapter=5>.

- Schoolchildren and a teacher from different schools in two different districts in Kashkadarya told UGF that children from 5<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> grades (ages 11-15) picked cotton for several weeks. Students in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades picked cotton after having a few classes each day but classes were suspended for children in 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> grades.<sup>4</sup> UGF observed that many rural schools in these districts stopped classes entirely and sent 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade pupils to pick cotton for up to three weeks. Radio Ozodlik [reported](#) a similar pattern in another district in Kashkadarya.
- UGF documented schoolchildren from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades from rural schools in Ellikkala, Beruni, and Turtkul districts in Karakalpakstan picking cotton. Classes were not held or were severely disrupted during the season as 40-50% of teachers in these schools also picked cotton. We interviewed school-children from several different schools picking cotton in Ellikkala district Karakalpakstan who said they picked cotton because their schools told them to.<sup>5</sup> We also interviewed parents in Karakalpakstan who brought their young children to the cotton fields because their *mahalla* [neighborhood] committees threatened to withhold their child welfare benefits if they refused and they had no one to care for their children. In some cases these young children also picked cotton. We also found that colleges in Karakalpakstan mobi-lized some first and second-year students (usually 16 and 17 years old) to pick cotton. For example, a 16-year old from Karakalpakstan told UGF that her college sent her and the other first-year students to pick cotton every weekend and threatened that they would not receive their diplomas if they refused.<sup>6</sup>
- UGF also interviewed parents from several families in Andijan who said that their schools collected payments or a certain amount of cotton from parents of young pupils, explaining that the payments were so the children would not be made to pick cotton.<sup>7</sup>



*Karakalpakstan, September 29, 2016  
Children harvest cotton under supervision of teachers.*

## The government ordered people to work

In [response](#) to a complaint about the forced labor of medical workers and teacher, a district prosecutor confirmed a July 20, 2016 protocol of the Cabinet of Ministers “On measures to harvest the 2016 cotton crop with enthusiasm and without loss,” ordered all employees to participate in the harvest.<sup>8</sup> In addition, many of people interviewed by UGF reported that they picked cotton because of government directives. For example:

- A member of the Jizzakh cotton headquarters [told](#) a shopkeeper who refused to pick cotton, “you do not have the right to refuse the orders of the acting president!...You are required [to pick cotton]

<sup>4</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interviews with 8<sup>th</sup> grade pupil in Yakkabog district, 9<sup>th</sup> grade pupil in Shahrisabz district, and schoolteacher in Yakkabog district, Kashkadarya region, November 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interviews with two 8<sup>th</sup> grade boys and an 8<sup>th</sup> grade girl, Ellikkala district, Karakalpakstan, October, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interview with first-year college student, Ellikkala district, Karakalpakstan, September 29, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interviews with parents, Andijan, November 29, 2016, and letter from parent to UGF, October 5, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from the acting prosecutor of the Chinaz district of Tashkent region D.R. Makhmudov to Elena Urlaeva, September 21, 2016, available at <http://harvestreport.uzbekgermanforum.org/d-r-makhmudovs-official-reply-to-elena-urlaevas-complaint/>.

and you will be mobilized on a compulsory basis. You live in this *mahalla* [neighborhood], you breathe the air here. So you will go pick cotton!”

- Government ledgers from different regions obtained by UGF track the number of employees each institution must provide to the harvest as well as the names of those responsible for fulfilling recruitment at each institution.

## Labor was involuntary

Public sector employees, students, and people receiving public benefits could not refuse to work.

- **People who did not want to or could not pick cotton were required to pay for a replacement worker to pick cotton in their names.** A college teacher from Syrdarya said, “Teachers don’t have the right to refuse to pick cotton... college teachers can only avoid picking cotton if they hire a day laborer to pick cotton in their name. To just stay home from the harvest means losing your job.” A lyceum employee from Andijan told UGF that a group of teachers at his school did not want to pick cotton and instead paid the farmer 162,000 *soum* per teacher from their own salaries (since each teacher was required to pick 60 kilograms per day for 10 days for a price of 270 *soum* per kilogram) and taught their classes instead. The farmer provided documentation that the teachers had picked the cotton.<sup>9</sup>
- **Statements of “voluntary” participation in the harvest.** Some students and public sector employees told UGF that their institutions required them to sign statements attesting to their willingness to pick cotton, which would be unnecessary for a truly voluntary activity. For example, a student from Samarkand signed a statement stating, “I guarantee that I will participate fully in the 2016 cotton harvest, pick 80 kilograms of cotton per day, and fulfill all other rules of the cotton harvest. If I do not fulfill these requirements, I agree to be expelled.”<sup>10</sup> Some [doctors](#) also signed statements of “voluntary” participation in the harvest.
- **No exemptions from picking.** Pregnant women, people caring for young children, and people with illnesses could not receive exemptions from cotton picking. For example, a college teacher from Andijan told UGF that she developed a serious illness during her 15-day shift. Her director told her he could not release her and she had to remain at the fields even though she could not pick cotton.<sup>11</sup>

## People worked under threat of penalty

People faced penalties for failure to pick cotton or failure to work hard enough. The most common penalties threatened included expulsion or academic difficulties for college and university students; being fired from employment or facing disciplinary measures; withholding of child welfare and other benefits payments; being cut off from public utilities, and in some cases physical violence. For example:

- A nurse from Kokand supervising other nurses picking cotton threatened their jobs and [forced](#) them to sign statements promising to resign if they did not fulfill the daily picking quota.

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<sup>9</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interview with lyceum employee, Andijan, October 20, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Statement of Samarkand State University student [name withheld] to dean Sh. U. Umidullaev, September 9, 2016. A copy of the statement is available at: <http://eltuz.com/ru/?p=1105>.

<sup>11</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interview with college teacher, Andijan, October 20, 2016.



- A caregiver at a kindergarten was [fired](#) for requesting to postpone her picking shift so that she could care for her children while her husband, who was also forcibly mobilized to pick cotton, was away at the fields.
- A *hokim* [district governor] in Kashkadarya [beat](#) a teacher in front of farmers, apparently because his wife's farm had failed to meet its cotton production quota. A college director in Karshi also said that the local *hokim* [beat](#) local officials who failed to deliver quotas.

### Economic burden of forced mobilization

Although for voluntary workers, picking cotton may be an important source of income, for the vast majority of public sector employees and students, cotton picking imposes a financial burden rather than an opportunity to supplement their incomes. Since the price paid for kilo (260-270 *soum* or \$.04 US in 2016) remains the same throughout the season, most voluntary workers want to pick cotton early in the season, when cotton is plentiful. At the end of the harvest, when cotton is sparse, voluntary labor declines. Calculating the number of voluntary workers presents significant challenges, since some voluntary workers work as replacement workers for people forced to pick cotton, and can command payment in addition to the price per kilo paid by the government.



*People were kept in the fields until November 6, when there was almost no cotton left.*

- **Food costs.** Workers on overnight shifts had food costs deducted from their earnings, equivalent to 25-35 kilograms per day. People who picked less than this went into debt for their food costs. Most workers interviewed by UGF also said that they had to buy supplemental food, at costs that used up or exceeded what they could earn picking cotton.
- **Additional costs.** Many involuntary laborers, particularly those sent to pick cotton for overnight shifts far from their homes had to pay for clothing, bathing, laundry, and transportation. For example, a university student from Andijan told UGF that she bought warm clothes costing about \$100 in preparation for spending two months picking cotton.<sup>12</sup> In some cases family members visited workers to bring food, incurring additional costs.
- **Low price per kilogram.** Since the price paid per kilogram of cotton picked was constant, workers could earn less and less as the amount of cotton left to pick declined. The government kept students and public sector employees in the fields through the end of October and in some cases as late as mid-November, when many workers reported that they could pick as few as 10 kilograms per day. A lyceum employee told UGF that he picked cotton in mid-October from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and could only pick 15-20 kilograms per day. He said "Money? Who needs the 3000 *soum* (approximately \$.50 US)? We didn't even take it. It's offensive that they chase teachers with higher education to work in the fields for such a miserly sum."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interview with university student, Andijan, October 20, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interview with lyceum employee, Andijan, October 20, 2016.

## Students

The situation of college (the equivalent of high school) and university students provides one of the starkest examples of forced labor.<sup>14</sup> In 2016, the government mobilized third-year college students and university students en masse and kept them in the fields for up to 60 days.<sup>15</sup> Unlike public sector and other adult workers who usually pick cotton in rotating shifts of 10-15 days, students usually pick cotton for the duration of the harvest, enduring poor, crowded, unsanitary living conditions and working long hours with no days off. The government also mobilized many college students, mostly third-year students, who are usually 18 and some first- and second-year students, who are usually 16 and 17.<sup>16</sup>

- **College and university students who refuse to pick cotton are threatened with poor grades, academic difficulties, or expulsion.** Many college and university students told UGF that they feared academic reprisals if they refused to pick cotton and teachers confirmed that they could take punitive measures against students who did not go to the fields. UGF received a credible report that a university student was expelled, and an independent news source [reported](#) that four other students in Kokand were also expelled because they did not pick cotton.
- **University students pay tuition to pick cotton.** Access to higher education is very limited, with many more applicants than available places.<sup>17</sup> The vast majority of university students pay tuition, from \$1000 to \$1,500 per year, a financial hardship for many families.<sup>18</sup> University students pay tuition for the two months they spend in the cotton fields, even though there are no classes during this time.
- **Students earn very little or incur debts picking cotton.** In 2016, a student who worked 8-10 hours a day for 30 days with no days off and managed to pick 60 kilograms per day could only earn about \$40 after deductions for food costs. Many take home even less since they pay for extra food, bathing, and laundry. During the second month of the harvest, many students cannot pick enough cotton even to cover their food costs. Students told UGF that universities could withhold students' stipend to cover these debts. One said, "We have no classes for two months and we're forced to work. When we return, they take our stipend."

## ILO Monitoring and Mitigation Measures

The ILO, through its agreements with the World Bank and the government, has undertaken efforts to monitor and survey labor and recruitment practices as well as implement measures to mitigate forced labor risks. However, with its tri-partite structure, all ILO efforts in Uzbekistan involve government officials as participants. UGF is concerned by the government's intensified efforts to conceal information about forced labor including by suppressing independent scrutiny.

### ILO Monitoring

Serious concerns remain that the ILO's monitoring methodology is insufficient to capture an accurate picture of forced labor practices.

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<sup>14</sup> According to official statistics, there are 58 universities in Uzbekistan with 251,874 students. See: <http://www.edu.uz/img/infografika.jpg>.

<sup>15</sup> According to official statistics, there are 250,000 university students in Uzbekistan.

<sup>16</sup> According to official statistics, there are 500,000 third-year college students in Uzbekistan.

<sup>17</sup> Universities and other higher education institutions only accept 10% of applicants. In 2016, there were 663,200 applicants for 62,907 seats. See: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2016/07/21/edu/>.

<sup>18</sup> In 2016, only 22,572 students attended university for free. The remaining 40,335 paid tuition. [http://www.norma.uz/raznoe/postanovlenie\\_prezidenta\\_respubliki\\_uzbekistan6](http://www.norma.uz/raznoe/postanovlenie_prezidenta_respubliki_uzbekistan6). Tuition: <http://nuz.uz/obschestvo/15873-plata-za-obuchenie-v-vuzah-uzbekistana-vros-la-na-15.html>.

- **People afraid to speak to monitors:** The presence of government or government-affiliated officials on all monitoring teams is a fundamental flaw that undermines the credibility of the ILO's findings. Many people are afraid to speak candidly in the presence of government or government-affiliated officials, a concern noted by the ILO in its 2015 monitoring report.<sup>19</sup>
- **People instructed to lie to monitors:** Many respondents told UGF that government officials instructed them to lie to ILO and other monitors by saying they are picking cotton voluntarily or to say they are technical staff instead of teachers, nurses, and doctors.
- **Steps to hide true working conditions from the ILO:** A university student from Andijan told UGF that in advance of a visit by ILO monitors, some students were assigned to clean the facilities where students were housed. On the day of the visit, students picking cotton received extra food, including meat and sweets, and enjoyed reduced working hours.<sup>20</sup>

### Reprisals against independent monitors and journalists

The government prevents independent scrutiny of its labor practices, including by interfering with human rights activists, independent monitors, and journalists documenting conditions in the country, including in the cotton sector, and by destroying information gathered.

- On October 6, police in Buka, Tashkent region, [arrested](#) activist Elena Urlaeva, photographer and translator Timur Karpov, and two French journalists, when they visited a cotton field. Police wiped Karpov's phone, which he opened under physical threat. Police destroyed all information on Urlaeva's phone and detained her for 10 hours, during which she was beaten in the presence of police by two women and kicked by a uniformed officer.
- Police in Alat district, Bukhara region, [arrested](#) Urlaeva and activist Malohat Eshankulova on October 9 for interviewing students picking cotton. They were subjected to a strip search, detained for several hours and had all their notes and data destroyed.
- On October 22, police in Akdarya district, Samarkand region, [arrested](#) Urlaeva and Eshankulova when they interviewed doctors picking cotton. Police strip searched them and destroyed their notes as well as all data on their phones and cameras.
- Police in Buka [arrested](#) Urlaeva again on November 5 when she visited cotton fields. They held her for six hours, searched her, and dismantled her phone.
- Uzbek officials detained German journalist Edda Schlager on November 10 and seized some of her materials, including those containing confidential interview information. They [deported](#) her the next day and banned her from returning to Uzbekistan for three years.
- On November 29, officials detained, interrogated, and [deported](#) Yekaterina Sazhneva, a journalist for the Russian newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, the day after she met with Urlaeva, and banned her from returning to Uzbekistan for three years.

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<sup>19</sup> International Labour Organization, "Third Party Monitoring of the use of child and forced labour during the Uzbekistan 2015 Cotton Harvest- An assessment submitted to the World Bank by the International Labour Office," 20 November 2015, at ¶160.

<sup>20</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interview with university student, Andijan city, October 20, 2016.

## Feedback Mechanism

The feedback mechanism, which consists of complaints hotlines run by the Trade Union Federation, which is not independent of the government, and the Ministry of Labor, has extremely low public confidence. The feedback mechanism does not provide protection against reprisals, which is crucial in the absence of independent courts, nongovernmental organizations, media, and other institutions that could help ensure its effectiveness and transparency.

- **Lack of independence:** nearly every one of the hundreds of people UGF spoke to during the 2016 harvest said they thought complaining would be pointless because forced labor is organized by the government. One said “Why should I complain to the government when it is the government that forces me to pick cotton?” UGF has documented several cases in which trade union officials organized the forced mobilization of their members to pick cotton or [supervised](#) them in the fields.
- **People warned against complaining:** Others told UGF that they had been warned not to complain. One woman told UGF that her employer said that anyone who complained about picking cotton would be sent to prison.<sup>21</sup> In another case, a conflict occurred between a public sector employee sent to pick cotton and a farmer. The employee told her relative, who decided to call the hotline for help. An official from the local administration intervened and ordered them not to call the hotline.<sup>22</sup>
- **Ineffective:** Journalists from Radio Ozodlik, the Uzbek service of Radio Liberty, [attempted](#) to contact the hotline several times but no one answered the phone. Activist Elena Urlaeva also [contacted](#) the hotline numerous times on behalf of medical workers and teachers and received no effective response to her complaints.
- **Allegations of reprisals for complaints:** UGF received a credible report that several students from a professional institute in Fergana who were forced to pick cotton were expelled for reporting their complaint to a feedback mechanism hotline. In another case, a woman told UGF that her neighbor called to complain that her daughter, who is 16, was sent to pick cotton for an overnight shift, far from home. Local authorities called the mother to their offices and scolded her for several hours until she agreed to write a statement that she does not oppose her daughter picking cotton as long as she stays near home.

An employee at a metallurgical factory in Bekabad told UGF that after UGF published a copy of the company's 2015 directive ordering workers to pick cotton under threat of dismissal, the company launched an investigation, sent several computers for examination by the National Security Service, cut off internet access to employees' computers, and banned flash drives on company premises. Employees must receive permission to use the internet and may only do so in a special room where they are recorded on video.<sup>23</sup>



*Schools in Fergana city obliged teachers to bring 5 kg cotton every day during another week after harvest has ended: package of cotton.*

<sup>21</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interview with public sector employee [1], district and region withheld, October 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interview with public sector employee [2], district and region withheld, October 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Letter to the Uzbek-German Forum from employee of Bekabad metallurgical factory, name withheld, December 1, 2016.