August 7, 2019

Dear Brands and Retailers,

We are writing on behalf of the Cotton Campaign to update you on recent developments regarding Uzbek cotton production and the next steps we envision to finally end forced labor in Uzbekistan.

Even as serious reform is at last underway, widespread systemic forced labor persisted in the later part of the 2018 cotton harvest. The Cotton Campaign believes that the Uzbek Cotton Pledge not to knowingly source cotton from Uzbekistan must remain in place until substantial further progress is made towards its elimination.

Following a decade of engagement and pressure by the Cotton Campaign and local activists, support from brands and retailers plus efforts by the ILO, a commitment to reform has been made at the highest levels of government and a significant, potentially historic transition is underway. Building on initial reforms announced as the 2017 harvest began, there were more concerted efforts by the central government to curtail forced labor during the 2018 harvest, reflected in some encouraging signs of progress. We observed a reduction in the number of people forced to work last autumn. However, because key root factors persisted, systemic forced labor remained prevalent and at least 170,000 workers were estimated by the ILO to have once again been forcibly mobilized.

The main driver of state-sponsored forced mobilization of cotton pickers continues to be quotas set by the central government. In the most recent harvest, especially in areas with low populations, officials at both the local and national levels forced citizens into the fields in order to fulfill the quotas. This labor force consisted of public sector workers; bank, factory, and small business employees; and later in the harvest, teachers and medical workers were again forced to pick cotton.

For over the past year, the Cotton Campaign has engaged positively and constructively with high-level Uzbek government officials to encourage specific steps to end the forced mobilization of cotton pickers. For details, please see the press releases about the Cotton Campaign delegation visit to Uzbekistan in May 2018 and the multi-stakeholder meeting with the Uzbek delegation in Washington, DC in February 2019.

An outcome of the February 2019 meeting—at the request of the Uzbek delegation—is the development of a Roadmap of Reforms for Uzbekistan. The attached Roadmap sets forth a comprehensive vision to end forced labor in the cotton industry and to ensure that reforms are fundamental and sustainable. To achieve this overarching goal, it lays out three core objectives: 1) End systemic forced labor, 2) Enact structural reforms, and 3) Empower civil society.

The three core objectives are complementary and mutually reinforcing. Systemic forced labor cannot be eliminated without the enactment of structural reforms; nor can reforms be achieved without the
empowerment of civil society to ensure transparency and accountability across every aspect of the reform process. While some of the reforms outlined require time to implement fully, we expect that further substantial, tangible, and measurable progress can and should be made towards each of the core objectives in the 2019 harvest and beyond on a continuing and accelerating basis.

For the upcoming harvest, we will look for essential interim steps: good faith progress on the reform process; no mobilization of public sector or private enterprises to pick cotton; investigations into forced labor to hold officials accountable; an end to punitive penalties to farmers for failure to meet quotas; and transparency around recruitment practices.

Through the Uzbek Cotton Pledge, [312 brands and retailers](#) have committed not to source cotton from Uzbekistan. The Cotton Campaign will evaluate progress by the Uzbek government on those interim steps—and on the overall core objectives, key actions, and specific outcomes set forth in the Roadmap—as the basis for our consideration of when to modify or lift the Uzbek Cotton Pledge. In the meantime, we urge brands and retailers to remain strong and steadfast in their support for the pledge and commitment to avoid sourcing Uzbek cotton until the reform process demonstrates greater progress.

The hard work of many stakeholders, including brands and retailers, to end state-sponsored forced labor in Uzbekistan is making a critical difference. While the process of reform remains incomplete, we would not be at this hopeful point towards ending forced labor in Uzbek cotton production without your support and commitment.

Thank you for helping to incentivize the end of forced labor in Uzbekistan’s cotton fields. We look forward to welcoming Uzbek cotton and cotton products to the global marketplace when we are confident that reforms are truly fundamental and sustainable. We encourage your feedback and input and will keep you updated during this process of transition.

Kind regards,

Patricia Jurewicz and Bennett Freeman, Cotton Campaign Co-founders, and Judy Gearhart, Executive Director of ILRF, host of the Cotton Campaign