

Turkmenistan: State-Imposed Forced Labor in the Cotton Harvest

4th Cycle Universal Periodic Review (2023)

Each year during the cotton harvest, which takes place between August and December, the Government of Turkmenistan **forces** tens of thousands of public sector workers, including employees of schools and hospitals, to **pick cotton** in hazardous and unsanitary conditions or **pay for replacement pickers**. The Government also extorts money from the same workers to pay expenses related to the harvest. These demands come under **threat of penalties**, including including loss of employment or reduction of work hours, to ensure compliance. Despite an official prohibition, **child labor** has been documented in every cotton harvest since the last review. Furthermore, the Government **imposes cotton production quotas** on farmers and enforces them with the threat of penalty, including fines and loss of land.

The Turkmen Government **severely represses** all civic freedoms, which are crucial to combating forced labor. Independent labor monitors and informants who provide evidence of forced labor conditions during the harvest do so at great personal risk.



2022 Cotton Harvest

Independent monitoring conducted by Cotton Campaign partners Turkmen News and the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights during the 2022 cotton harvest found that forced labor of public sector employees continued to be widespread and systematic.



Scan the QR code to
download the full report

Proposed Recommendations to the Government of Turkmenistan

- ▶ Develop a time-bound plan to reform the root causes of forced labor in the cotton sector, in consultation with independent worker and employer organizations, civil society, and the ILO.
- ▶ Enforce national laws that prohibit the use of forced and child labor, in alignment with ratified ILO Conventions.
- ▶ Instruct government representatives at all levels on the prohibition of forced labor and strengthen law enforcement - including by prosecuting or sanctioning appropriately officials found to be mobilising forced labor.
- ▶ Acknowledge that forced labor exists in Turkmenistan and make public, high-level policy statements condemning it, specifically including forced labor in the cotton sector, making clear that all work should be voluntary and fairly compensated.
- ▶ Allow independent monitors, journalists, and human rights defenders to document and report labor conditions without fear of reprisal.
- ▶ Fully cooperate with UN agencies and human rights bodies, including by facilitating all visit requests by Human Rights Council special procedure mandate holders and allowing unhindered access to the country to the ILO.

Insufficient Implementation of 3rd Cycle Recommendations

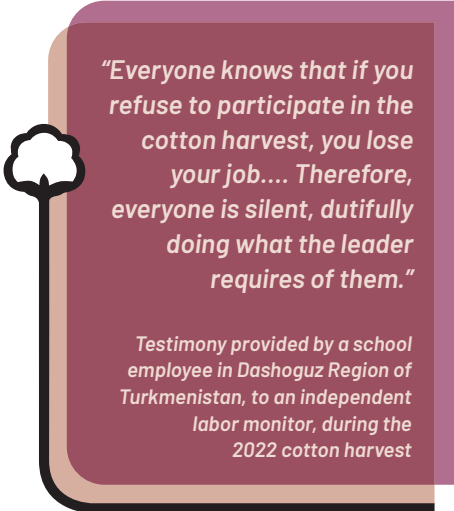
The following recommendations were **supported** by the Government of Turkmenistan:

- ▶ “Work in partnership with the International Labour Organization to eliminate forced labour in connection with State-sponsored cotton harvesting” (UK)
- ▶ “Strengthen its policy on prevention and combat of child labour, and on the full guarantee of the rights of child, with special attention to children without parental care” (Tajikistan)
- ▶ “Introduce legal measures that prohibit forced and child labour” (Poland)

However, no new legislation has been enacted prohibiting forced and child labor since Turkmenistan’s last review, nor have prevention measures been taken to reduce child labor. The Government of Turkmenistan has recently begun engaging with the ILO on a program of cooperation to implement the ILO Convention on the Abolition of Forced Labor, which is a positive step. Yet at the same time, the Government continues to publicly deny the use of forced labour in the harvest – most recently this year during ILO and UN reviews¹ – and there is no indication that it has taken steps to ensure forced labor will not be used during the 2023 cotton harvest.

The following recommendation was merely **noted** by the Government, and has not been implemented:

- ▶ “Establish a time-bound national plan of action to address forced labour in cotton farming and abolish mandatory production and sanctions for non-compliance with cotton quotas” (Chile)



“Everyone knows that if you refuse to participate in the cotton harvest, you lose your job.... Therefore, everyone is silent, dutifully doing what the leader requires of them.”

Testimony provided by a school employee in Dashoguz Region of Turkmenistan, to an independent labor monitor, during the 2022 cotton harvest

International Actors Have Consistently Urged Turkmenistan to End State-Imposed Forced Labor

There is a strong record of reporting and communication from international observers, finding that Turkmenistan has made insufficient progress to end state-imposed forced labor in the cotton sector. In June 2023, the ILO Committee on the Application of Standards “deplored the persistence of the widespread use of forced labour in relation to the annual state-sponsored cotton harvest in Turkmenistan and the Government’s failure to make any meaningful progress on the matter since the Committee discussed the case in 2016 and 2021.”² The UN Human Rights Committee (2023) expressed its “concern about the widespread use of forced labour of civil servants during the cotton harvest (mainly women), under threat of penalties”; the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery expressed similar “deep concern” in 2021.³ In 2023, Turkmenistan was kept at Tier 3 in the US Department of State Trafficking in Persons report, the lowest possible ranking.

Growing Momentum to Eliminate Forced Labor From Global Supply Chains

Pressuring the Government of Turkmenistan to end its forced labor system is consistent with efforts undertaken by governments and companies to eliminate products made with forced labor – including products made with cotton originating in Turkmenistan – from global supply chains. In an increasing number of jurisdictions, companies must comply with laws governing human rights due diligence, supply chains, and imports, such as the Withhold Release Order against Turkmen cotton in the US, the import ban on forced labor products in Canada, and the Supply Chain Act in Germany. Additionally, the imports and sale of products made with forced labor will soon be banned across the whole EU. Furthermore, 140 global brands and retailers have signed the Turkmen Cotton Pledge – hosted by the Cotton Campaign – and committed to not use Turkmen cotton in their products as long as it is produced with state-imposed forced labor.

The Cotton Campaign

We are a coalition of international human and labor rights NGOs, independent trade unions, brand and retail associations, responsible investor organisations, supply chain transparency groups, and academic partners, united to end forced labor and promote decent work for cotton workers in Central Asia.

www.cottoncampaign.org

¹ ILO Committee on the Application of Standards, CAN/PV.15/Turkmenistan-C.105, 12 June 2023, Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105); UN Human Rights Committee, ‘Concluding observations on the third periodic report of Turkmenistan’ (12 April 2023), UN Doc CCPR/C/TKM/CO/3.

² ILO Committee on the Application of Standards, op.cit.

³ UN Human Rights Committee, op.cit.; UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, ‘Concerns raised regarding allegations of forced labour in the cotton picking harvest of 2019 and 2020’ (30 August 2021), UN Doc AL TKM 2/2021.