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**Berlin, 04/12/2013**

Dear Mrs. Flor,

We are writing today to present the Cotton Campaign's findings on the continuing use of forced labor of children and adults in the cotton harvest 2013 in Uzbekistan and to express our serious concern about the continued widespread and gross violations that Uzbek citizens are exposed to by the government of Uzbekistan. Please find enclosed the report of November 27, 2013. We ask the EU to conduct a robust and transparent human rights policy towards Uzbekistan in accordance with the EU Strategic Framework on Human Rights, and to assess Tashkent's compliance with specific benchmarks which will allow it to effectively measure progress.

We furthermore would like to bring to your attention the fact that during the last several months, human rights activists living in Europe are being threatened by the Uzbek government (see below for further information). We call on the EU to protect human rights activists in Europe with all appropriate means, especially through expressing state concern publicly and in meetings with the Uzbek government.

As you are aware, the human rights situation in Uzbekistan is appalling. State use of torture continues systematically, which was confirmed recently by the November 2013 Conclusions of the United Nations Committee against Torture (CAT) following its review of the country. The Uzbek government interfered with the standard working procedures of the International Committee of the Red Cross to such an extent, including making impossible confidential visits with detainees and prisoners, that the organization took the rare step in April 2013 to announce publicly it had been forced to terminate its prison visits.

Eight years after the Andijan massacre with hundreds of largely peaceful protesters killed by Uzbek government forces, none of the responsible government representatives have been held accountable.

Only recently, the deaths of two persons in prison were reported to the public. According to the media service Uznews.net, on June 12, 2013, in Namangan region, the 28-year-old Muzaffar Karimov died of a „traumatic brain injury“ shortly after being arrested on suspicion of theft.

According to BBC O‘zbek, on November 15, 2013, the authorities returned the body of a 36-year-old Tavakkal Hojiev from Andijan. He was sentenced in September 2005 to 17 years in prison, after having participated at the demonstration in Andijan that preceded the state’s use of deadly force.

Also, Uzbek citizens are denied their right to freedom of expression. The government does not allow independent media to operate in the country. Journalists which publish in independent journals are systematically harassed, imprisoned or forced to leave the country. The authorities arrested and detained independent journalist Sergei Naumov, who had frequently reported on forced labor, for 12 days. Likewise, all international human rights organizations have been shut down.

This year, the Uzbek government has gone to great lengths to threaten and punish Uzbek human rights activists living abroad. In July 2013, Tashkent city criminal court sentenced France based Mrs. Nadejda Atayeva, head of the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia (AHRCA) to six years of imprisonment in a penal colony. In addition, the National Security Service harassed and intimidated relatives of Mrs. Umida Niyazova, head of the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights (UGF). Both are co-writers of this letter.

As can be seen from the Cotton Campaign report, the situation in the cotton fields remains worrying as well: This fall, the Uzbek government coercively mobilized more than a million citizens, including children, to cultivate and pick cotton. The government systematically mobilized children aged 15 to 17 and adults throughout the country, and authorities mobilized even younger children in some places. Forced child labor was organized through the state education system, under threat of expulsion from school. Public- and private-sector workers were forced to pick cotton under threat of losing their jobs. Authorities transported students from the schools to the fields in public buses, and students and adults who were deployed to pick cotton far from their homes were housed in schools and other public buildings, often at the expense of the people being forced to pick cotton.

Eleven citizens lost their lives as a result of the forced-labor system this year. The tragic losses included Tursunali Sadikov, a 63-year-old farmer who died of a heart attack after being beaten by an official of the Department of Internal Affairs, and Amirbek Rakhmatov, a six-year-old schoolboy who accompanied his mother to the cotton fields, napped in a trailer, and suffocated when cotton was loaded on top of him.

As the report details, the government took extensive measures to whitewash labor rights violations to create the impression of voluntary work in the cotton fields. Prior to the harvest, the government inserted a clause in contracts for public-sector workers making work in the cotton harvest a condition of employment. School administrators required students and parents to sign commitments at enrollment that students would pick cotton. Throughout the country, authorities instructed children at schools and adults in their workplaces and communities to report to foreigners that they picked cotton “voluntarily” and “for the love of the motherland.” As in previous years, the government silenced Uzbek human rights monitors through arrest, imprisonment and intimidation.

The Uzbek government also took extensive measures to mislead the international community and create the impression that improvements have been made in terms of child labor and forced labor. Thus, the government builds on its long-standing practice to deny its role orchestrating the forced-labor system, claim that new policies are in place, and refuse to end the human rights violations.

The EU should not be deceived by Tashkent's misrepresentations, while it continues systematic torture, forced labor and harassment of citizens who claim their rights under the law. In recent years, the EU referred to successes in the framework of the EU-Uzbekistan human rights dialogue as well as its establishment of a permanent diplomatic mission in Tashkent, yet the human rights situation has continued to deteriorate.

The Uzbek government has not taken any meaningful steps to improve the human rights situation. It is incumbent on the EU to put forward specific requirements expected from the Uzbek authorities, as we and other human rights organizations have consistently highlighted.

With this letter we ask you as the Special Representative for Central Asia to review the Central Asia strategy. The Uzbek government has not used the time granted to it to undertake substantial reforms. The human rights dialogue with Uzbekistan began in 2007, and Uzbek citizens have not experienced a substantial improvement in the six years since. The government's continued and systematic use of forced labor in the cotton fields again demonstrates that the government maintains its position of denial instead of really sincerely pursuing reforms.

The Uzbek government's disregard for its international human rights commitments can no longer be tolerated by the international community. Thus, we strongly urge the EU to revise the EU-Central Asia Strategy, specifically to:

- Set conditions and benchmarks and clearly articulate the specific reform steps. Such steps have already been formulated by EU foreign ministers, in the context of the sanctions process, most recently in October 2010, but are currently not being actively enforced. These human rights criteria, listed below, should form the core standards against which the EU measures its relationship with Tashkent.
- Engage in sustained and active policy follow-up at all levels to secure compliance with the benchmarks, especially at the highest levels – including in EU member states' bilateral relations. This entails raising human rights concerns at every opportunity, including publicly, to make clear the central role of the human rights demands in the relationship.
- Impose policy consequences if reform expectations are not met. EU member states should set a clear timeline for the government to heed, once and for all, the EU's human rights criteria or face concrete consequences, including the prospect of renewed restrictions on its relationship. The European Parliament set a positive example in December 2011, rejecting a proposed reduction of EU textile tariffs for Uzbekistan until the government grants access for international monitors for its cotton harvest and takes concrete steps to end forced child labor, introducing much-needed conditionality in the EU-Uzbekistan relationship.
- Consider instituting targeted restrictive measures, including visa bans on individual Uzbek officials implicated in serious abuses, if progress is not made.

We reiterate that the government of Uzbekistan must immediately:

1. Unconditionally release all political prisoners, including imprisoned human rights activists, journalists, and peaceful opposition activists and religious believers;
2. Grant all UN special rapporteurs who have requested access to visit Uzbekistan immediate access to the country, after denying their entry since 2003;
3. Allow Human Rights Watch and other international human rights NGOs to return to the country and to carry out independent monitoring of the human rights situation.
4. Allow freedom of the press, including opening airwaves to Ozodlik radio, BBC, Deutsche Welle and other media agencies;
5. Allow an international independent investigation into the May 2005 Andijan massacre.
6. Stop the forced labor of adults and children in the cotton sector.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. We look forward to the opportunity to personally discuss these issues.

Yours sincerely,

Uzbek German Forum for Human Rights, UGF

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