



**UZBEK FORUM**  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

# 10 YEARS

MONITORING AND REPORTING  
ON CHILD AND FORCED LABOR  
IN UZBEKISTAN'S COTTON SECTOR





This year, Uzbek Forum is conducting monitoring of Uzbekistan's cotton harvest and advocating for reforms to end forced labor for the tenth consecutive year. With the 2020 harvest now underway, we take a look back at how our organization together with brave human rights defenders worked to expose the system of forced labor.

# 10 YEARS

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**MONITORING AND REPORTING  
ON CHILD AND FORCED LABOR  
IN UZBEKISTAN'S  
COTTON SECTOR**


When Uzbek Forum\* (then Uzbek-German Forum/UGF) began monitoring, the Uzbek government operated the world's largest orchestration of state-sponsored child and forced labor. It is difficult to estimate the full societal impact of the system that forced millions of people to give up weeks or months of their lives every year, resulting in the closures of schools, the inability of hospitals to function properly, the loss of economic productivity, and the fundamental freedom of people to make their own choices. Uzbekistan has yet to begin to grapple with the enormity of the impact and loss the forced labor system has had on its society and economy, much less the countless personal tragedies it entailed. Amid all the celebration of the reform process, there should also be some sober reflection and some attempt to make amends through investments in education, healthcare, and affected communities.

## SOCIETAL IMPACT OF THE FORCED LABOR SYSTEM

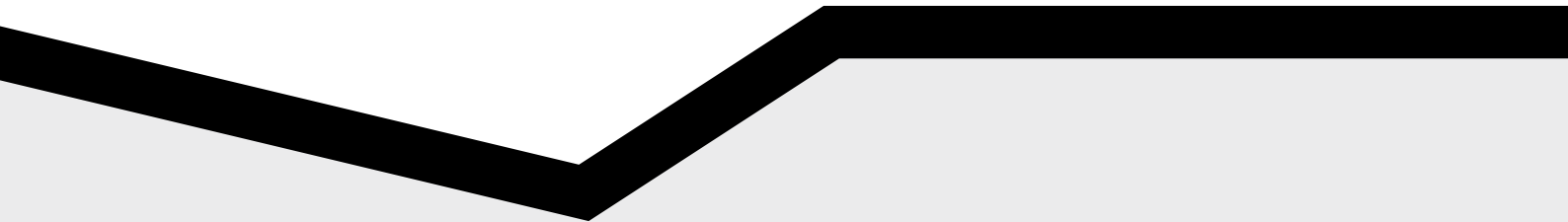
\*Uzbek Forum changed its name from Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights (UGF) in 2020. Most of the reports have therefore been published under the name of UGF. For consistency, this article references all our publications under the new name of Uzbek Forum.

Empty schoolroom,  
Jizzakh region, 2011





In this article we re-trace the last ten years, highlighting some of the challenges, milestones and victories along the way. It is impossible to catalogue each and every event or the many lost and shattered lives that fell victim to the menace of forced labor in Uzbekistan. This condensed review does however demonstrate that change is possible, that it comes slowly and often at great personal cost. Indeed, the changes we celebrate today, including the fact that civil society monitors are now able to conduct monitoring for the ILO, would not have been possible if not for the work of the brave Uzbek Forum monitors and other activists who brought independent information about forced labor to the world for years when no one else did.



**These monitors and activists worked at great personal risk and suffered hugely for it. Some of the reprisals are touched on in this article, but there are many more. The government and the rest of the world owe them a debt of gratitude and should compensate them for harms suffered.**



# 2009

## A SEED IS PLANTED

A **petition** initiated and signed by Uzbek Forum for Human Rights and human rights defenders both inside Uzbekistan and in exile calling for a boycott of Uzbek cotton gains the attention of the international community who collectively raise awareness of the issue and galvanize public opinion. Uzbek Forum becomes a frontline partner of the **Cotton Campaign**, an international coalition of NGOs, academics, investors, industry representatives and trade unions. Uzbek Forum's independent monitoring of the cotton harvest provides the basis of the Cotton Campaign's advocacy and communications strategy.

Uzbek Forum partners with the Environmental Justice Foundation to publish a **joint report** based on the findings of its monitoring of the 2009 cotton harvest.



# 2010

## PITY THE CHILDREN

The numbers of **school-age children** forcibly sent to the cotton harvest each year are estimated to be approximately one million. Buses organized by the government are sent to schools where children are collected and brought to the fields often with little protection from the scorching sun and harmful chemicals. Younger children work in day shifts and are expected to collect 30-60 kilos of cotton per day. Children older than the seventh grade are sent for longer periods, separated from their families, housed in **poor living conditions**, often without water or heating and inadequate food. Richer parents pay local officials instead of sending their children to the fields as they know they will return home sick.



2010

A **joint report** with the Environmental Justice Foundation and Anti-Slavery International details the miserable conditions under which children are mobilized to the fields. For failure to meet the picking quotas children may be accused of being unpatriotic, scolded or even beaten. It is difficult to quantify the lost hours of school time and the impact this practice has had on children's education, health and personal development.

Together with ECCHR and Sherpa, Uzbek Forum files a **joint complaint to the OECD** against seven cotton dealers from France, Germany, Switzerland and the UK for knowingly profiting from forced child labour.

2010 is one of the largest harvests in decades but children **continue to be sent to the fields** although the cotton quota has been fulfilled.

Uzbek Forum produces the first **video report** revealing the extent of child labor in the cotton fields.



# COTTON IS NOT A PLANT, IT'S POLITICS

## 2011

Uzbek Forum's report on the 2011 harvest, **Cotton is not a Plant, it's Politics**, unravels and exposes the government-orchestrated forced labor system. Then Prime Minister, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, is personally responsible for oversight of the agricultural sector and the cotton harvest, conducting regular conference calls with hokims (district officials) and other government officials.

The European Parliament overwhelmingly rejects a proposal to extend a trade deal with Uzbekistan due to concerns over the on-going use of forced labor in the country's cotton industry but stops short of applying laws against trade of products made with forced labor and with partners who practice forced labor.

In the course of monitoring child labor, independent journalists and human rights activists, including Elena Urlayeva, leader of the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan, are harassed and detained by the authorities.

The unsafe environment and lack of care results in tragic accidents involving children during the harvest. On September 24, 2011 Bakhodir Pardayev, a 13-year-old boy from Kashkadarya region, was **hit by a car** while returning from the cotton fields. The boy lay in a coma for 22 days and has never regained his speech.

Uzbek Forum submits a **report** to the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights for the review of Uzbekistan on the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Not only did the Uzbek government continue to **deny the existence of child and forced labor**, many in the international community **downplayed** the seriousness of the issue, with one diplomat in Tashkent describing Uzbek students' annual sojourn to the cotton fields as a „rite of passage and a fun social occasion where they play guitars and eat trail mix.“

# 2012

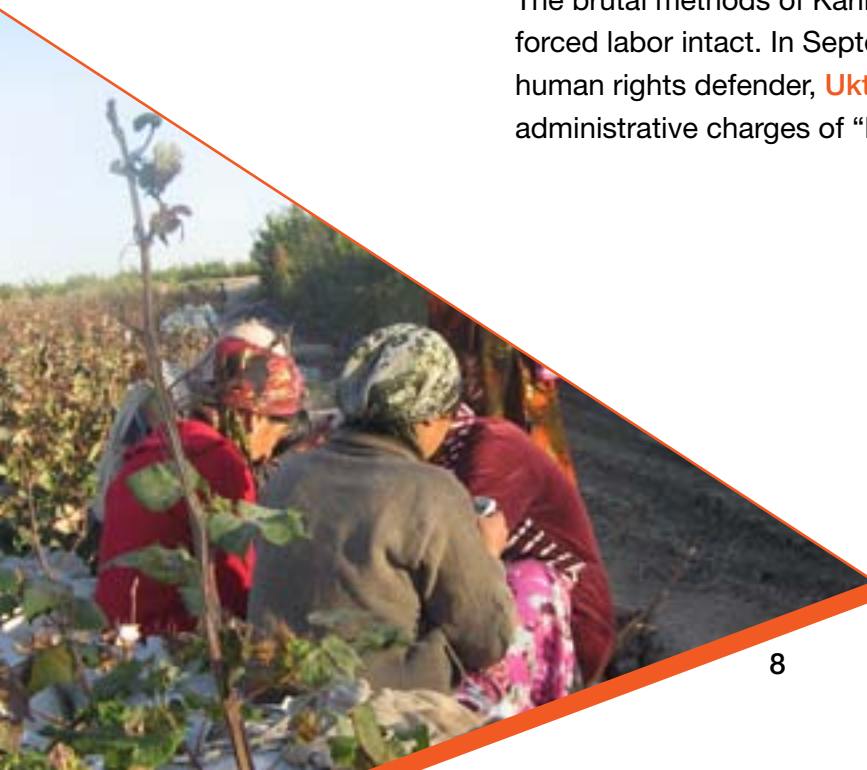
## CHANGE WILL COME

In a **joint report** on the 2012 harvest, Uzbek Forum and the Cotton Campaign urge the Government of Uzbekistan to take immediate action to end child and adult forced labor, recommending a high-level tripartite observer mission by the ILO. The report presciently warns that,

*these recommendations derive from the premise that stability and rule of law are in the interest of governments and the private sector alike. In deciding to take a stand against forced labor, governments and companies should consider that political change will eventually come to Uzbekistan, and that the people of Uzbekistan will long remember if the world did everything possible to end their servitude.*

In July 2012, in an apparent response to international pressure, then Prime Minister, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, issues orders that schoolchildren are no longer to be sent to pick cotton in accordance with national law that prohibits child labor. However, the move initially only excludes very young children while older school-age children and college students continue to be sent by the state to pick cotton. Students who fail to pick the required amount of cotton each day are subjected to humiliation, beatings, and threats of expulsion.

The brutal methods of Karimov's regime keep the system of forced labor intact. In September 2012, authorities beat and detain human rights defender, **Uktam Pardaev**, for over 15 days on minor administrative charges of "hooliganism" and "resisting arrest."





# PRESSURE MOUNTS

## 2013

UZBEK HUMAN RIGHTS MONITORS ARE SILENCED THROUGH ARREST, IMPRISONMENT AND INTIMIDATION.

The Uzbek Government finally agrees to allow the ILO into the country to conduct monitoring of the harvest, something the Cotton Campaign had been advocating for years. However, **despite the presence of ILO monitors**, accompanied by government officials, forced child and adult labor continue unabated. At the same time, Uzbek human rights monitors are silenced through arrest, imprisonment and intimidation. **Sergei Naumov**, an independent Uzbek journalist is held for three days incommunicado while conducting monitoring of the harvest and is jailed on **fabricated charges** of “hooliganism”. 18-year-old Navruz Muyzinov is **beaten to death by police officers** after leaving his assigned cotton field without meeting his cotton picking quota.

Uzbek Forum publishes a **joint report** with the Cotton Campaign on the 2013 harvest. The misery caused through the forced mobilization of citizens to the fields includes separation of families for weeks on end, poor accommodation in the fields without clean drinking water or sanitary provisions and slave wages from which pickers have to pay for their food and transportation. Refusal to pick cotton carries penalties such as dismissal, loss of benefits and even beatings by government officials.

In 2013, eleven citizens lose their lives as a result of the forced labor system. In a **particularly tragic case**, a six-year old, who had accompanied his mother while she picked cotton, suffocates after cotton is loaded on top of him where he had fallen asleep. His body is only discovered when the trailer is emptied.

Uzbek Forum files a **formal complaint** with the World Bank Inspection Panel together with the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia and “Ezgulik”, the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, requesting an investigation of the World Bank’s Rural Enterprise Support Project Phase II. The complaint is based on the Bank’s failure to prevent World Bank funds from contributing to government orchestrated forced labor.

Over 100 companies sign the **Pledge** not to source Uzbek cotton.



THE GOVERNMENT'S RICHES,  
THE PEOPLE'S BURDEN

2014

## CHILDREN RETURN TO SCHOOL

The 2014 harvest is the first autumn that all children are allowed to remain at school without having to pick cotton. However, the deficit in available numbers of cheap labor is compensated by the mobilization of other demographic groups: college students and adults.

Uzbek Forum's **report** of the 2014 harvest documents the highest number of **deaths and injuries** caused through suicides, accidents related to cotton picking, and health issues exacerbated by back-breaking work in shifts of up to 12 hours to collect up to 80 kilos of cotton per day for \$0.04 per kilo. Earnings barely cover the costs for food, accommodation and transport to the fields. The report also exposes the scale of extortion in cotton production at all levels of government and the involvement of multinational companies including General Motors and Telia Sonera.

Finally, after years of sustained international pressure, the Uzbek government signs a Decent Work Country Program with the ILO, in which it commits to work with the ILO to apply labor conventions.

# 2015

## THE COVER UP

Uzbek Forum publishes “**The Cover Up – Whitewashing Uzbekistan’s White Gold**” which details the system of forced labor and corruption at the heart of the sector. The Finance Ministry controls expenditures and income for cotton through a cashless system of credit managed by the Selkhozfond, a non-transparent fund that is not included in Uzbekistan’s national budgets.

The World Bank approves two new loans for agricultural development and modernization. The loan contracts stipulate that the loans could be subject to cancellation and repayment if forced labor or forced child labor is detected in the project areas and contracts the ILO to conduct third-party monitoring. The ILO, accompanied by government officials, finds that “Monitoring has not provided conclusive information that beneficiaries of World Bank projects used child or forced labor during the cotton harvest.”<sup>1</sup>

**Harassment of human rights defenders** is brutal and relentless. Uktam Pardaev is again **arrested by the authorities** in retaliation for his monitoring of forced labor; Uzbek Forum monitor, **Dmitry Tikhonov**, flees Uzbekistan after repeated persecution, including the burning of his home; and Elena Urlaeva is detained five times in one year.

**Uktam Pardaev**  
Human rights defender



**Elena Urlaeva and Malohat Eshonkulova**  
Human rights defenders



<sup>1</sup> ILO Third Party Monitoring Report, Key Findings, 2015, p. 3.

# A NEW PRESIDENT 2016



“WHEN WILL  
THE COTTON  
HARVEST  
BE OVER?  
WILL WE  
STUDY  
AT ALL?”

Former Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev, once tasked with the oversight of the cotton harvest, becomes President of Uzbekistan in December 2016, following the death of Islam Karimov in September that year.

The continued forced mobilization of pickers to the cotton harvest involves hundreds of thousands of students, nurses, doctors, teachers and other public sector employees who risk losing their jobs if they refuse. Employees who can afford it, pay for replacement pickers while others are made to **sign declarations** that they are going to the fields voluntarily.

Uzbek Forum’s **report** on the 2016 harvest provides comprehensive analysis of the system of forced labor in all 13 regions of the country. It highlights the **plight of students** forced to pick cotton for weeks on end, even with little cotton left at the end of the season, and threatened with expulsion for refusal.

Amid protests from human rights organizations, the EU **backs a textile trade deal** with Uzbekistan despite continued and widespread forced labor.

Human rights defenders, Elena Urayeva and Malokhat Eshonkulova, are detained and subjected to **brutal and humiliating treatment** by the authorities in the course of monitoring the harvest. In a bizarre interpretation of events, government officials **blame human rights activists** for the state’s failure to meet the annual cotton quota.

Umida Niyazova, Director of Uzbek Forum, accepts the **Human Rights Defenders Award** of the International Labor Rights Forum on behalf of Uzbek human rights defenders Uktam Parдав, Elena Urayeva, and Dmitry Tikhonov.



**Umida Niyazova**

Founder, Director Uzbek  
Forum for Human Rights

# STUDENTS FREE TO STUDY

In the summer of 2017, Uzbek Forum launches a **petition** calling for an end to the mobilization of students to pick cotton.

Uzbek Forum partners with Human Rights Watch to produce a **115-page report** of the 2015 and 2016 harvests, exposing the World Bank's links to child and forced labor in projects worth half a billion dollars to the Uzbek Government. Intense advocacy with the World Bank leads to a historic public acknowledgement of the use of forced labor in a **speech** by President Mirziyoyev at the UN in September 2017.

“WE PICK  
COTTON  
OUT OF FEAR”

Following Mirziyoyev's speech, then World Bank president Jim Yong Kim urges Mirziyoyev to implement reforms to end forced labor. The next day, Uzbekistan recalls 200,000 university students and some health and education workers from the cotton fields. No students have since been forced to pick cotton.

Uzbek Forum's report of the 2017 harvest, **“We Pick Cotton out of Fear”**, confirms ongoing systematic forced labor and again links human rights violations and forced labor to World Bank financed projects. The report also finds that central government continues to direct regional and local officials to mobilize pickers.

Human rights defenders continue to be subjected to threats, harassment and arbitrary detention. The EU releases a **statement** in which it raises concerns about the treatment of the human rights defender Elena Urlaeva by law enforcement officers during her **forced detention in a psychiatric clinic** on March 1, 2017.

Uzbekistan's new found tolerance of dissenting voices meets its limits as journalist and blogger **Bobomurod Abdullaev** is arrested on charges of attempting to overthrow the state and is subjected to torture during **detention**.

The Uzbek Government begins the privatization of the cotton sector, ending the state's decades-long monopoly.



# A NEW REALITY

# 2018

“THEY SAID  
WE WOULDN’T  
HAVE TO PICK  
AND NOW  
THEY SEND  
US TO THE  
FIELDS.”

The Uzbek government begins the release of dozens of political prisoners and a growing independent online blogging community critical of government policies gives hope that Mirziyoyev’s reform process is sincere and could even pave the way to democratic transformation. Uzbekistan is welcomed back on to the world stage while multimillion dollar investments flood into the country in the **haze of Mirziyoyev’s ambitious reform effort**.

Uzbek Forum’s **report of the 2018 harvest** acknowledges significant progress made in reducing the numbers of pickers sent to the fields but that widespread forced labor persists due to structural factors such as production quotas that remain largely in place.

The situation for farmers becomes increasingly precarious. Uzbek Forum **reports** on numerous cases of farmers whose land is confiscated for failing to meet cotton quotas and are driven to destitution, in some cases resulting in suicide.

For the first time, after years of dismissing the harvest findings of independent monitors as fabricated, government ministers engage directly with members of the Cotton Campaign in a **delegation visit** to Tashkent.

Uzbek Forum is nominated for the **Human Rights and Business Award** for “important work deserving international recognition” and Umida Niyazova receives the **Journalist for Peace Award** from the Forum of Mediterranean Women Journalists.

# 2019

## ONE STEP FORWARD....

“TASHKENT’S  
REFORMS  
HAVE NOT YET  
REACHED US”

Despite significant progress, the 2019 harvest does not show the level of improvement on the elimination of forced labor that had been expected by many in the international community. Extortion of employees to pay for cotton pickers, orders from government ministries to send employees to the fields as well as harassment of human rights defenders continue.

At the request of the Uzbek Government, the Cotton Campaign develops a **roadmap** of recommendations to eliminate forced labor in the cotton sector. Although a number of the recommendations are subsequently implemented, Uzbek Forum’s **report** on the 2019 harvest, cites a lack of effective, independent recruitment channels as a major obstacle in preventing the involvement of the government in the use of forced labor. In addition, Uzbek Forum **reports** on the illegal confiscation of land from farmers for the benefit of private cotton companies.

Over 300 international brands and retailers have now signed the **pledge** not to source Uzbek cotton as long as it is at risk of being produced by forced labor while Uzbekistan remains on the Tier 2 Watch List of the US State Department’s **Trafficking in Persons Report** for goods made with forced labor.

The EU Parliament **approves recommendations** made by Uzbek Forum and others to improve its human rights record and abolish forced labor.

# 2020

## THE ROAD AHEAD

In January, a second delegation of Cotton Campaign members visits Tashkent for meetings with government ministers to discuss the remaining challenges in implementing laws that prohibit forced labor. During the visit, **local civil society activists** are harassed and prevented from meeting with representatives of the Cotton Campaign.

In March 2020, the Uzbek government finally abolishes the state-set cotton quota, one of the key drivers of forced labor, that Uzbek Forum and others had advocated for years. Presidential decrees stipulate that local officials should have no further involvement in the cotton harvest. An extensive awareness raising campaign to inform citizens of the prohibition of forced labor, wage increases for pickers and the introduction of hotlines to report complaints have contributed significantly to reducing the numbers of those now being forced to the fields.

As of April 2020, forced and child labor is a criminal offence carrying penalties of up to three years imprisonment or correctional work.

In recognition of the progress made and the challenges that remain, the Cotton Campaign begins developing the framework for a Responsible Sourcing Agreement which would facilitate the sourcing of Uzbek cotton under strict conditions that guarantee basic labor rights and attract brands back to the country.

Human rights defenders  
of the initiative group  
Chiroq, Karakalpakstan







PHOTO CREDIT: @Elyor Nemat

## OUT OF THE FIRE INTO THE CAULDRON?

In June, Uzbek Forum publishes a **joint report** with the University of Ulster detailing a network of corrupt practices relating to the Uzbek cotton sector. The report raises a number of red flags associated with some of the largest textile firms in Uzbekistan and their connections to politically exposed persons.

Uzbek Forum is now **monitoring the 2020 harvest** which will be a litmus test of the effectiveness and sustainability of President Mirziyoyev's reform program. Although it is too early to draw conclusions, initial findings confirm cases of coercion and extortion throughout the country.

These findings confirm that the progress made to date will be difficult to sustain in isolation from a program of broader reforms that strengthen freedom of association, freedom of expression and other core human rights. Without an enabling environment for civil society to form independent trade unions and civil society groups that can operate, monitor and report on rights violations without fear or interference, the progress in the elimination of forced labor may well begin to stagnate. We'll keep you posted.



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