



**“THERE IS A LOT OF COTTON,
BUT NO ONE TO PICK IT.”**

**SHORTAGE OF PICKERS DRIVEN BY
GOVERNMENT INTERFERENCE AND FAILED
PAYMENTS TO FARMERS**



**UZBEK FORUM
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**

“There is a lot of cotton, but no one to pick it.”

Shortage of pickers driven by government interference and failed payments to farmers.

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Cover Photo:

Cotton field full of unharvested cotton, Uzbekistan district, Fergana region, November 23, 2024. © Resident of Uzbekistan district who shared the photo with Uzbek Forum and asked to remain anonymous.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2024 cotton harvest displayed unwarranted interference by the government by renegeing on positive legislation that was intended to give farmers more autonomy and control over their production costs, including negotiating cotton prices directly with cotton clusters and wages for pickers.¹

As a result of an acute shortage of pickers and lack of harvesting machinery, significant amounts of cotton were left unharvested in the fields in November. Following a government intervention to reduce the price of cotton in September, farmers struggled to pay competitive rates to recruit sufficient numbers of pickers which left production targets for harvested cotton unfulfilled. Pressure from the presidential administration to local officials responsible for fulfilling production targets for each district was passed down to mahalla officials and state-owned organizations in an effort to mobilise pickers.²

Instances of state-imposed forced labor of state employees to pick cotton were documented during the early stages of the harvest in districts that fell behind the harvest schedule which is controlled by the presidential administration and requires farmers to turn in 4% of their forecast cotton production targets per day.

Although the government abolished the state-set cotton quota in 2020, these production targets for cotton serve as de facto quotas, and are based on forecast yields derived from the system of forced crop placement.

The government made interventions to address instances of state-imposed forced labor after they were made known, and cases appeared to decrease as the harvest progressed. However, monitoring findings of the 2024 cotton harvest again revealed the inherent risks linked to persistent administrative control over cotton production.

The government has made significant progress in eliminating widespread state-imposed forced but eradicating the remaining risks requires even implementation of the reforms the government committed to in its own agriculture development strategy.³ To ensure the sustainability of these reforms, the government must make good on its promises to create an enabling environment for freedom of association and civil society to conduct unobstructed independent monitoring and reporting.

1 Clusters are privately-owned cotton companies that usually combine the production, processing, and often manufacture of finished cotton textile goods.

2 Mahallas are neighborhood councils whose employees are responsible for responding to issues in their communities, as well as the disbursement of social welfare payments.

3 Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, *On approval of the Strategy for the Development of Agriculture of the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2020-2030*, October 23, 2019: <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/4567337>

I.1 KEY FINDINGS

- The acute shortage of pickers was caused by the inability of farmers to pay competitive wages due to rising production costs, government interference and chronic outstanding debts of cotton clusters to farmers.
- Two significant and sudden government interventions reversed the government's own recent legislation that allowed farmers to negotiate the procurement price of cotton with cotton-textile clusters and imposed a mandatory increase in wages for pickers.
- Contradictory policies, government interference and continued imposition of de facto production quotas were enforced through threat of penalty, creating a high-risk environment for state-imposed forced labor and exploitation of farmers.
- Rural residents turned to other seasonal employment where earning potential was higher.
- The slow pace of the 2024 harvest and failure to fulfill the harvest schedule put officials under increased pressure to recruit more pickers than were available.
- The shortage of pickers and machinery resulted in large amounts of cotton left unharvested in the fields.
- Approximately 3.1 million tons of cotton were harvested in autumn 2024 instead of the planned 3.6 million tons.⁴
- Monitors found no widespread, systematic, government-imposed forced labor during the 2024 harvest.
- Monitors documented cases of state-imposed forced labor of employees of state-owned enterprises in several districts to either go to the fields themselves or pay for replacement pickers.
- No cases of child labor were observed in the districts monitored.
- Media reports of state-imposed forced labor of state employees and mahalla residents in mid-October were responded to by the Senate and the Ministry of Education and appeared to result in a decline in reported cases of forced labor by the end of the harvest.⁵

4 President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, address to the agricultural workers of Uzbekistan, December 8, 2024: <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/7755>

5 Kun.uz, "Ўаммадан бир хил ундирилади" – Китобда ёшлар етакчиларининг маоши пахта терими учун ушлаб қолинмоқда", September 18, 2024: <https://kun.uz/kr/news/2024/09/18/hammadan-bir-xil-undiriladi-kitobda-yoshlar-yetakchilarining-maoshi-paxta-terimi-uchun-ushlab-qolinmoqda>

I.2 TIMELINE OF KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN 2024

- From January – February farmers concluded futures contracts directly with clusters through the Uzbek Commodity Exchange and agreed on the price and amount of cotton to be supplied.
- In September, clusters appealed to the government that the price agreed to in these contracts meant they would not be able to make a profit due to the fall in the global price of cotton. They requested intervention from the government to lower the price of cotton to be paid to farmers.
- On September 13, the government issued a resolution that unilaterally set the purchase price for cotton at 6,800 UZS (approximately \$0.52 US) per kilo of cotton and offered farmers a subsidy of 1,000 UZS (approximately \$0.08 US) per kilo.⁶ This significantly lowered the price many farmers had agreed to in their futures contracts with clusters and directly impacted their ability to pay competitive rates to pickers.
- On October 9, the Ministry of Agriculture issued an announcement that farmers should raise the payment to cotton pickers to 2,500 UZS (approximately \$0.19 US) per kilo to address the shortage of pickers.⁷

Clusters, cotton production and procurement

The Uzbek government began the privatization of the cotton sector in 2019 through the creation of so-called cotton-textile clusters, private companies that integrate production, processing and sometimes manufacture of cotton goods. The vast majority of clusters conclude futures contracts with farmers to supply a given amount of cotton at a negotiated price at the beginning of the year. A small number of clusters employ farmworkers to grow cotton on their own land leased to them by the state. This method has come under sharp scrutiny following the reallocation of thousands of hectares of farmland for the benefit of clusters through forced ‘voluntary’ land lease terminations.⁸

6 Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 574, *On measures to provide financial support to cotton producers*, September 13, 2024: <https://lex.uz/docs/7103548>

7 Telegram channel of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Uzbekistan, October 9, 2024: <https://t.me/uzagroministry/29834>

8 The Diplomat, *The Legitimization of Land Grabbing in Uzbekistan’s Cotton Sector*, December 10, 2024: <https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/the-legitimization-of-land-grabbing-in-uzbekistans-cotton-sector/>

METHODOLOGY

The information gathered for this report is based on 42 interviews with people involved in the 2024 cotton harvest as well as analysis of media reports, social media messages and legislation before and during the harvest.

Uzbek Forum monitors live permanently in the areas they monitored, enabling them to follow developments throughout the cotton harvest which began in late August and continued until the last week of November in 2024.

Seven monitors conducted monitoring of the 2024 harvest in 16 districts in Khorezm, Andijan, Fergana, Namangan and Jizzakh regions as well as the Republic of Karakalpakstan. Analysis of additional information from social networks and local media outlets provided additional insight into the harvest in at least another 30 districts of Uzbekistan.

Monitors have worked with Uzbek Forum for between five and 13 years and have extensive networks in their communities which gives them access to first-hand information based on trusted relationships. During the cotton season, monitors traveled to cotton fields and conducted interviews with cotton pickers, pickers brigade leaders, farmers, mahalla staff, and agricultural experts, including lawyers, cotton cooperative leaders and members of local councils. Monitors regularly reviewed information on local community social networks and dedicated Telegram channels where farmers shared their concerns during the cotton harvest.

STATE-IMPOSED FORCED LABOR IN THE 2024 COTTON HARVEST

3.1 ONGOING RISKS AND ROOT CAUSES OF STATE-IMPOSED FORCED LABOR

Isolated cases of state-imposed forced labor in the 2024 harvest can be attributed to a combination of factors: (i) farmers were unable to pay rates high enough to incentivize voluntary cotton picking; (ii) the government continued to control the harvest and impose de facto production targets on cotton farmers which local officials are tasked with fulfilling; and (iii) the lack of functioning grievance mechanisms and strong and independent unions that can protect workers from forced labor at workplaces, including in state-owned organizations.

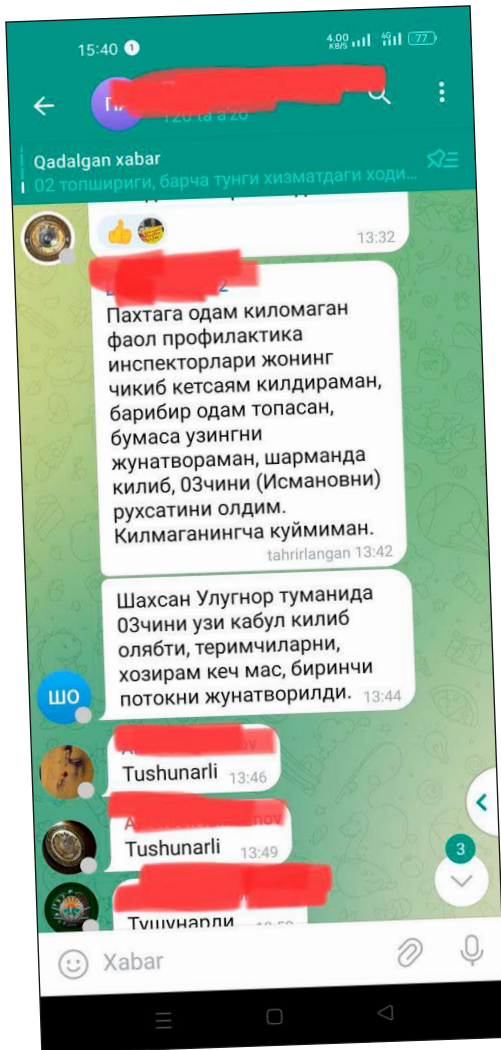
Heads of regions and districts (hokims), responsible for the timely harvest of cotton were under intense pressure from the presidential administration to submit daily reports on the amount of cotton harvested in their districts. Against the backdrop of a shortage of pickers, some hokims resorted to mobilizing employees of state-owned organizations to pick cotton.



Cotton pickers and officials of Buston district hokimiyat of Andijan region pray to God for a successful cotton harvest . September 12 , 2024 .
© Buston district hokimiyat

The organization of the cotton harvest relies on a system in which local authorities are caught between conflicting obligations: the duty to ensure that cotton is harvested as quickly as possible – even if there are insufficient numbers of voluntary pickers and cotton harvesting machines to do so –, the threat of reprisals from their superiors for failing to ensure that harvest targets are fulfilled, and the risk of prosecution for resorting to state-imposed forced labor. The pressure created from the government’s unwillingness to end its firm grip over cotton production targets through the so-called “cotton plan” or forecasts, that have effectively replaced the state-set cotton quota, meant that the risk of forced labor during the cotton harvest remained high.

In the first half of October, information began to appear in the media and social networks that employees of state institutions were being forced to go out to pick cotton or hand over money as incentives to recruit more voluntary pickers. There were also reports of threats by mahalla officials



Message published on Telegram and addressed to crime prevention officers ,
 "I will still make you all find the pickers , otherwise you will go to pick cotton
 yourself with shame . . ." Ulugnor district , Andijan region , October 1 , 2024 .
 Source : <https://t.me/bastiongr/12621>

to withhold child allowance payments or other forms of social support such as subsidized gas cylinders. Uzbek Forum documented approximately 25 known cases of various kinds of forced labor, but in each case the number of people affected could potentially have been several dozen.

Uzbek Forum recorded five cases of the involvement of employees of state-owned electricity, road construction, gas and water supply organizations in cotton harvesting in several districts of Fergana region and Karakalpakstan. Employees were requested by their superiors to help farmers pick cotton before the rains came, and in most cases, employees could not refuse or did not want to refuse because they were afraid of spoiling relations with management.

According to an employee of a road construction organization in Buvayda district in Fergana region, "The head of the organization told us that now is not the time when you can force people to pick cotton, but you understand that the hokimiyat has asked us to help. There are only 90 workers in our organization. We work in shifts and about 25-30 people go out to pick cotton. How much money did I make? I don't know. I spent all the money on a nice lunch with the others. We did not go to pick cotton for money, but because the management told us to."⁹

In Karakalpakstan, an employee of an electricity network in Shumanai district and an employee of a construction organization in Takhiatash district described a similar situation in interviews with Uzbek Forum. From the end of September, the management asked employees to go out to pick cotton on weekends. Some employees went out voluntarily, but others did not want to spend their day off in the cotton fields. Others did not want to argue with their bosses and paid for replacement pickers instead.

Monitoring findings suggest that the state-imposed forced labor of employees of state-owned enterprises to pick cotton was not widespread and most of the cases documented by monitors and reported in the media took place in the first weeks of October. However, media reports and monitoring findings suggest that local officials who directly ordered the mobilization of state employees to pick cotton received a clear signal from their superiors not to resort to forced labor and, by the end of October, the number of cases had noticeably decreased.

State-imposed forced labor mainly took place in a covert form through extortion of state employees, such as asking them to provide "charitable assistance" for the harvest. In one case, as reported in the media, the hokims of three regions gathered the heads of banks and ordered them to collect 100 to 300 million UZS in cash (approximately \$7,700 - \$23,000 US) for the cotton harvest to be used as additional payments to recruit pickers.¹⁰

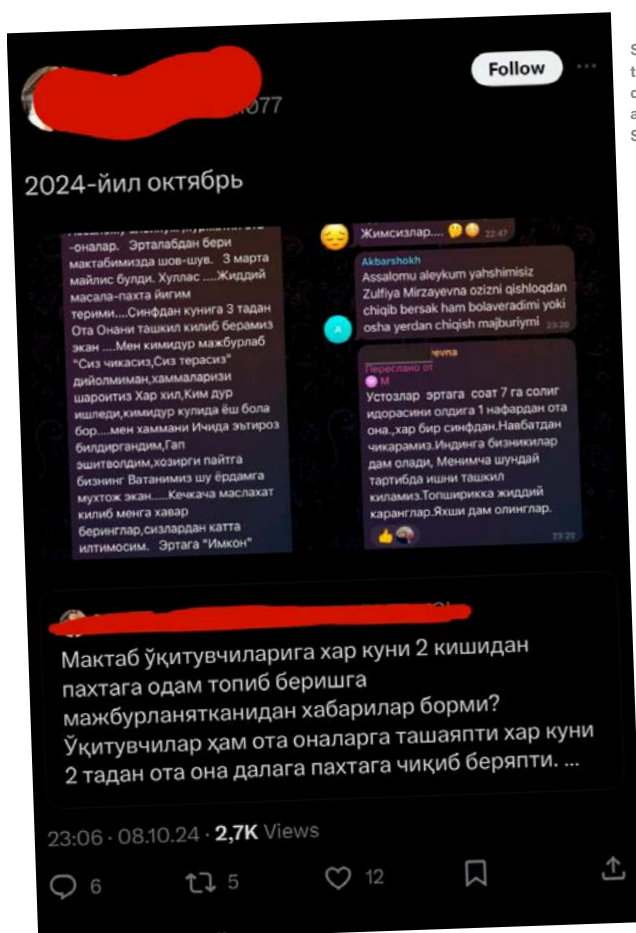
9 Interview with an employee, October 3, 2024. On file with Uzbek Forum.

10 Kun.uz, "Айрим фермерлар қаматиб юбориш билан қўрқитиляпти". Мутахассислар – пахта нархи пасайиши ҳақида, September 23, 2024: <https://kun.uz/kr/news/2024/09/23/ayrim-fermerlar-qamatib-yuborish-bilan-qorqitilyapti-mutaxassislar-paxta-narxi-pasayishi-haqida>

3.2 EXAMPLES OF STATE-IMPOSED FORCED LABOR IN THE 2024 HARVEST

In the first few weeks of the harvest, Uzbek Forum monitors and local media documented several cases where state employees or mahalla residents were mobilized to pick cotton under threat of penalty or were forced to pay for replacement pickers:

- **October 14, Andijan city:** In a leaked video, an employee of the hokimiyat in Andijan city demanded that 90 hokimiyat assistants bring one picker each to Ulugnor district the next day with an overnight stay.¹¹
- **October 9, Kashkadarya, Shakhrisabz district:** Several media outlets published an audio recording of a mahalla official's appeal to residents of the mahalla in receipt of child allowances, demanding that they go to pick cotton and threatening that those who refused would be deprived of the allowance in future.¹² In this case, the official was held accountable and fined 18,750,000 UZS (approximately \$1,465 USD).¹³
- **October 9, Andijan region (district not known):** The management of one school pressured teachers to use their authority to request that pupils' parents go to pick cotton. A screenshot of a message to the parents' group from a teacher reads, "There's been a big commotion at our school since this morning. We have already had three assemblies. In general, the cotton-picking situation is serious. We are required to provide three parents from each class to help with the harvest."¹⁴



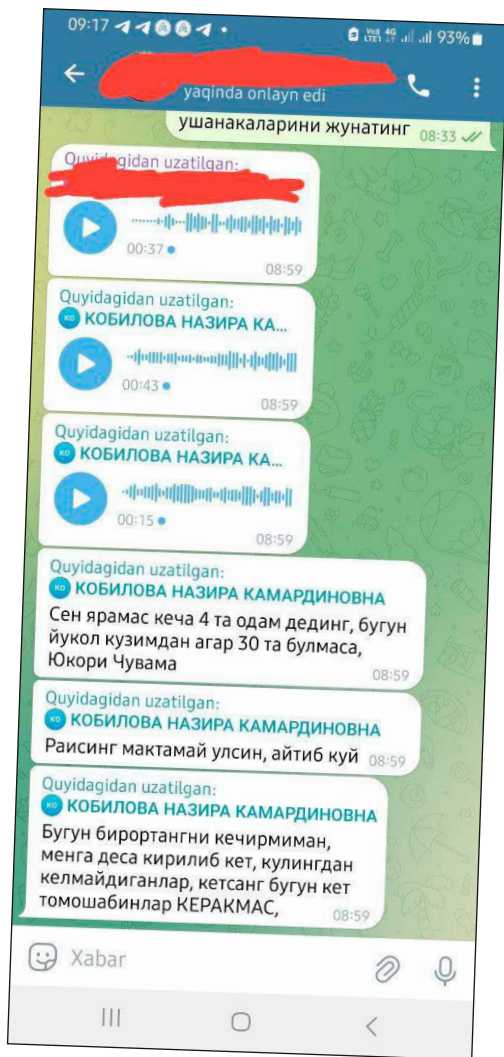
Screenshot from a Telegram chat group for parents . A school teacher asks parents to help her find two cotton pickers per day as she was requested to find pickers by the school administration . Location unknown . October 8 , 2024 . Source : https://t.me/patru_uz/64462

11 Message of the Rost 24 Telegram channel, *Пахта теримига чиқмасаларинг бола пулини олмайсизлар – Маҳалла раиси*, October 9, 2024: https://t.me/rost_24uz/10564

12 Message of the Vodiy 1 Telegram channel, October 10, 2024: <https://t.me/Vodiy1uzofficial/83787>

13 Kun.uz, *Ўқитувчиларнинг пахта теримига жалб этилиши ноқонуний – ММТБ*, October 9, 2024: <https://kun.uz/kr/47646833>

14 Telegram message, October 9, 2024: <https://t.me/davletovuztw/2191>



Screenshot from a Telegram chat group for mahalla and hokimiyat employees. The deputy hokim of Izboskan district of Andijan region demands to find pickers. "Today I will not forgive anyone. If you can't cope, then quit". Izboskan district, Andijan region, October 8, 2024. Source : <https://t.me/bastiongr/12682>

- **October 9, Andijan region, Izboskan district:** Deputy hokim Nazira Kobilova demanded that hokimiyat employees find cotton pickers under the threat of penalty, including losing their jobs. In messages sent to her subordinates in a Telegram group, Kobilova insulted an employee who did not recruit enough pickers and then said, "You only got four people out yesterday. Get out of my sight if you don't bring 30 people today. I won't forgive anyone today. Die all of you. If you can't handle it, quit today. I don't need you."¹⁵
- **October 8, Surkhandarya, Termez city:** Employees of the oil depot wrote to Ozodlik, the Uzbek language version of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), that their head, G. Norkobilov, was forcing workers to travel to Sherabad district to harvest cotton, where he had been appointed to organize cotton picking. Those who did not want to pick cotton were forced to pay 150,000 UZS (approximately \$12 USD) per day.¹⁶
- **September 23, Andijan region, Izboskan district:** The hokim of Izboskan district issued an order to give gas cylinders only to those who go out to pick cotton. The mahalla was also instructed to call all residents receiving child allowances to pick cotton under the threat of suspending payment of allowances.¹⁷
- **September 18, Kashkadarya region, Kitob and Nishon districts:** An audio recording of a conversation between an employee and the director of the Kitob district youth agency revealed that each employee had to hand over 3 million UZS from his/her salary for cotton.¹⁸



Local officials ordered the distribution of gas cylinders at a reduced price only to those who go out to pick cotton, Izboskan district, Andijan region. September 23, 2024. Photo was sent by a social media user and published by numerous media outlets. Source : <https://t.me/sizdantelegram/47269>

15 Telegram message, October 9, 2024: <https://t.me/bastiongr/12682>

16 Ozodlik/Sizdan Telegram message, October 8, 2024: <https://t.me/sizdantelegram/47360>

17 Eltuz Telegram message, September 23, 2024: <https://t.me/eltuz2022/30889>

18 Kun.uz, "Хаммадан бир хил ундирилади" – Китобда ёшлар етакчиларининг маоши пахта терими учун ушлаб қолинмоқда, September 18, 2024: <https://kun.uz/kr/news/2024/09/18/hammadan-bir-xil-undiriladi-kitobda-yoshlar-yetakchilarining-maoshi-paxta-terimi-uchun-ushlab-qolinmoqda>

3.3 GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO PREVENT COERCION OF PICKERS

At the height of the cotton harvest in early October when reports of the use of forced labor to pick cotton began to appear on social media, the National Commission on Combating Human Trafficking and Decent Labor Issues,¹⁹ the Ministry of Education,²⁰ and the Labor Inspectorate,²¹ issued public statements on the prohibition of forced labor, suggesting that the central government had taken notice.

On October 10, the Senate of the Oliy Majlis posted an official statement:

The National Commission on Combating Human Trafficking and Decent Labor Issues has taken under control cases of non-payment of social benefits to the citizens who did not go to the cotton harvest, as well as cases of school teachers forced to send people to the cotton harvest, which were widely reported on social networks. These cases will be investigated immediately and legal assessment of the activities of those responsible will be ensured. If such cases are identified, you can contact the short numbers 1282 or 1092 or via the Telegram bot @munosibmehnat_bot.²²

The State Labor Inspectorate reported holding more than 27,000 trainings and round tables on the prevention of forced labor with the total participation of more than 700,000 people.²³

According to Abdusamad Abdukarimov, head of the State Labor Inspectorate of the Ministry of Poverty Reduction and Employment, during the cotton harvest season, more than 350 labor inspectors inspected 22,000 organizations, farms and fields to prevent forced labor and create favorable working conditions.²⁴ A dedicated hotline and social media channels for reporting labor rights violations received 283 complaints. Of these, 26 complaints related to forced labor, 27 to inadequate conditions of decent work, 219 on delayed payments to cotton pickers and other issues related to payment for cotton picking.

Based on the results of the labor inspection, the State Labor Inspectorate issued written orders to the heads of 13 farms, and administrative protocols were drawn up in respect of five officials, the statement said. However, the statement lacks information about which administrative articles were violated or what consequences there were for the officials.

19 Kun.uz, “Масъулларнинг фаолиятига ҳуқуқий баҳо берилади” – Сенат пахта теримига мажбурлаш ҳолатларига муносабат билдирди, October 10, 2024: <https://kun.uz/kr/news/2024/10/10/masullarning-faoliyatiga-huquqiy-bahoberiladi-senat-paxta-terimiga-majburlash-holatlariga-munosabat-bildirdi>

20 Kun.uz, Ўқитувчиларнинг пахта теримига жалб этилиши ноқонуний – ММТВ, October 9, 2024: <https://kun.uz/kr/47646833>

21 Telegram channel of the Ministry of Poverty Reduction and Employment, October 10, 2024: <https://t.me/mehnatvazirligi/17701>

22 Telegram channel of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis, October 10, 2024: <https://t.me/senatuz/30628>

23 Briefing of the Ministry of Poverty Reduction and Employment, *On creating working conditions and preventing forced labor during the cotton harvest*, October 24, 2024: <https://gov.uz/oz/bv/news/view/25315>

24 Ibid.

GOVERNMENT CONTROL OF THE HARVEST AND LIMITED BARGAINING POWER FOR FARMERS

4.1 FORCED CROP PLACEMENT AND DE FACTO PRODUCTION QUOTAS

In March 2020, a decree issued by President Mirziyoyev, for the first time, declared that starting with the 2020 harvest, the “state order for the production of cotton and grain” would be canceled and the “practice of setting purchase prices for raw cotton” would be abolished.²⁵ President Mirziyoyev had previously stated at a public meeting, that “the abolition of the state order in the cotton and grain harvest would lead to the elimination of the race to fulfill the plan and would increase the responsibility of hokims “tenfold.”²⁶

State-imposed production quotas for cotton were abolished via a presidential decree in March 2020 after being identified as a key driver of state-imposed forced labor. However, the quota persists in the form of production forecasts which are derived from the system of forced crop placement. This system applies to all cotton and grain farmers who account for over 70% of all cultivated land in Uzbekistan and predicts the yields of crops for each farmer in each district of the country. Farmers’ land leases for cotton and grain stipulate forecast yields for each farmer based on previous years and other factors including soil salinity and availability of water. The individual predicted yields of each cotton and grain farm provide the forecasts or targets for each district which officials are obliged to ensure are delivered.

Farmers with low yields of cotton production are often forced to violate the obligation to implement crop placement which permits them to grow only cotton and grain. Farmers who cultivate crops other than cotton and grain risk termination of their land leases for “inappropriate” use of the land plot. At their own risk, some farmers planted products that were profitable for them simply because they were unable to meet the projected yield of cotton during the 2024 harvest. As farmers pointed out in interviews with Uzbek Forum, if they did not exceed 25-30 centners of cotton per hectare, the cost of production would be higher than what they would earn from its sale.

Farmer Mansurbek Yuldoshev from Kegeyli district in Karakalpakstan told media outlet Kun.uz that local authorities destroyed the rice he had planted on 14 hectares of his farm. The farmer said that on September 26, police officers came to his field, arrested his farm worker and took him away. Police officers then brought three tractors to plow the rice field, destroying the crop that was almost ripe. According to the farmer, the authorities destroyed his main source of income. The farmer said that he was obliged to fulfill a quota for cotton and grain production, from which he would make no profit and had therefore planted rice to earn a living. “I don’t profit from either cotton or wheat because they take my crops from me at the price they set,” the farmer told media outlet Kun.uz.²⁷

In an interview with Uzbek Forum, a farmer from Shavat district, Khorezm region, said that crop placement is the main tool for exerting pressure on farmers that makes them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.²⁸ Farmers in Khorezm prefer to produce rice, as rice production is much more profitable, but the land is allocated for cotton production only. Farmers are afraid to oppose local officials and agree to take on unfavorable obligations, such as growing silkworm cocoons or agreeing to a reduction of their cotton price for fear that their fields could be destroyed or their land leases terminated.

25 Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, *On measures for the widespread introduction of market principles in the cotton growing sector*, March 6, 2020: <https://lex.uz/docs/4756992>

26 Gazeta.uz, “Столетняя система отменяется за три года” – президент о госплане, February 15, 2020: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2020/02/15/gosplan/>

27 Kun.uz, *Кошмар фермера – в Кегейли уничтожено 14 гектаров полей с созревающим рисом*, October 2, 2024: <https://kun.uz/ru/news/2024/10/02/koshmar-fermera-v-kegeyli-unichtojyeno-14-gektarov-poley-s-sozrevayushchim-risom>

28 Interview with a farmer in Shavat district, Khorezm region, September 18, 2024. On file with Uzbek Forum.

4.2 GOVERNMENT ENFORCEMENT OF HARVEST PRODUCTION TARGETS

Government officials were required to ensure the timely fulfillment of daily cotton production targets under threat of penalty, including dismissal or other punitive actions. This pressure was passed down the chain of command to district hokims and mahalla officials who are tasked with recruiting pickers. As in previous years, the cotton harvest was supervised by Presidential Advisor Shukhrat Ganiev, who monitored the pace of the cotton harvest on a daily basis and received reports from hokims and other officials.



The hokim of Fergana region , Khayrulla Bozorov , honors the head of Buvayda district police with a *chapan* (an Uzbek traditional robe) for being the first in the district to fulfill their contractual obligations , October 12 , 2024 . Source : @Buvayda . info <https://t.me/buvaydainfo/7537>

“Every morning at 7:30 a.m. a meeting on cotton was held at the regional hokim’s office. At 13:00, Presidential Advisor Shukhrat Ganiev held a meeting with district hokims and their deputies via Zoom. Heads of districts who failed to meet their cotton harvest forecasts or fell behind received strict warnings,” a district official in Khorezm region told Uzbek Forum.

Three fragments of audio recordings of conference calls between Ganiev and local officials were leaked on September 16, revealing the level of pressure on officials to meet the targets in their districts.²⁹

In the recordings, Ganiev is heard listing how many tons of cotton a particular region had to harvest and scolding hokims whose figures were low: “All districts must harvest at least 70% of the cotton by October 1. Do you all hear me?” The officials respond, “Yes, we understand.” Ganiev then goes on to address officials by name and interrogate them about the amounts already harvested and the planning for the day. For example, the deputy hokim of Samarkand region, Shunkor Khudojberdiev, responds, “If we are lucky, we’ll be able to harvest 5,800 tons today.” Ganiev then asks one of the four district governors from Samarkand present on the conference call, “Do you have no conscience? [...] Do you want to be disabled?”, to which the hokim responds, “We will organize [the required production], I heard you. We will take measures to increase the cotton harvest to 4% and complete it by the 30th.”

According to the harvest schedule, each farmer throughout the country was required to harvest 4% per day of their total cotton production plan. The recordings reveal that Ganiev was dissatisfied with the daily amount of cotton harvested and, on several occasions, demanded that the number of tons to be harvested on a particular day should be increased. However, in order to accelerate the pace of the

29 Message shared on Sizdan Telegram Channel, September 16, 2024: <https://t.me/sizdantelegram/47190>

harvest, more pickers were required. This task was in turn passed from hokims to mahalla officials who are required to recruit a given number of people to the fields each day. Mahalla officials who spoke to Uzbek Forum monitors described public humiliation and insults from hokims when they were unable to recruit sufficient numbers of pickers.

4.3 FALSIFICATIONS OF PRODUCTION QUOTAS

The annual cotton production forecasts for each district and region, de facto state-set quotas, are derived from the forecast yields of each individual farm, determined by the amount and fertility of land allocated to farms exclusively for cotton and grain production. The state order to produce a pre-determined amount of cotton, also known as a quota, was abolished in 2020 after it was identified as one of the key drivers of the systematic forced labor of cotton pickers.

According to official data, Uzbekistan harvested over 3.1 million tons of cotton in 2024, but dozens of farmers claim that this figure is likely to be inflated, as they were forced to engage in *pripiska* (falsifications), a practice widely used during Soviet times whereby local officials are required to report on fulfilled cotton quotas for their districts and “assist” farmers to register non-existent amounts of cotton at cotton collection points.

In a report published by Radio Ozodlik, dozens of farmers and employees of hokimiyats they spoke to confirmed that falsifications during the 2024 harvest were commonplace and were done at the end of the harvest to improve the district’s performance.³⁰

A farmer from Rishton district in Fergana region told Uzbek Forum monitors that the entire district leadership, the hokim, the prosecutor, and the chief of police, were all involved in the falsification scheme. “The scheme is simple”, said the farmer. “The cotton trailer drives into the cotton receiving point, the cotton is weighed on electronic scales, registered, but not unloaded. The trailer with the cotton leaves and then re-enters the cotton point again,” he said.³¹

Ozodlik declined to make the audio recordings of the interviews with farmers and officials public to avoid jeopardizing the security of their sources.

“The hokim, the prosecutor and the head of the Department of Internal Affairs have bled the farmers dry. We paid for falsifications to the deputy hokim for agriculture (the name of the deputy is known to Ozodlik). I myself personally paid \$2,000 to have 20 tons of cotton attributed to me. Everything is written down in a separate notebook with the names of farmers who gave money for the falsifications. I know for sure one farmer was assigned 15 tons of cotton, another farmer paid to have 18 tons of cotton assigned to him. This money is not accounted for anywhere, it goes into pockets,” said a farmer from Andijan district.

This information is identical to what farmers told Uzbek Forum monitors in Fergana and Andijan regions. A farmer from Andijan district said that all farmers he knew inflated their quotas by between 10 and 50 tons of cotton than was actually harvested in order to meet their targets. “So our district met its quota. I don’t know about the region.”³²

30 Radio Ozodlik, *Qo’shib yozish: Terilmagan paxta pullari kimning cho’ntagiga ketyapti?*, December 13, 2024: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_X3QNoqXXo&t=1s

31 Interview with a farmer, Rishton district, Fergana region, November 9, 2024. On file with Uzbek Forum.

32 Interview with a farmer in Andijan district, Andijan region, November 26, 2024. On file with Uzbek Forum.

GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS

5.1 GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION TO SET A MINIMUM WAGE FOR PICKERS

In order to attract more cotton pickers to the fields, the Ministry of Agriculture issued an announcement on October 9, on the decision to raise the payment to cotton pickers from to 2,500 UZS (approximately \$0.19 US) per kilo. The announcement stated that, taking into account “some difficulties in attracting pickers to seasonal work, as well as for the further strengthening of material incentives for pickers, starting from October 9, the cost of a kilogram of cotton picked by hand has been increased by 1,000 UZS and set at 2,500 UZS for pickers in all regions of the country.”³³

The statement indicated that 2,000 UZS would be allocated from the state support fund for agriculture as a loan to farmers, and the remaining 500 UZS would be paid for by clusters. However, Davron Vakhobov, Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, at an online meeting with farmers the following day, clarified that the additional 1,000 UZS for cotton pickers would be shared equally by farmers and clusters.³⁴

“Due to the fact that seasonal workers have the opportunity to earn 150-250,000 UZS per day (approximately \$12 - \$19 US) working on smallholder plots by, for example, harvesting potatoes or mung beans, farmers have faced a shortage of cotton pickers,” said Vakhobov. According to Vakhobov, there were approximately one million people picking cotton which was insufficient to meet production targets. He argued that it was necessary to increase the rates for pickers to ensure a timely harvest and ensure that no cotton would remain on the fields. Vakhobov said that over the past two years, cotton and textile clusters had been in financial difficulty because of higher credit rates from international banks and lower demand for textile products on the global market.

During the same online meeting with farmers, Vakhobov said that the amount paid to pickers on average was 20% of the cost of cotton production. However, after the decision to increase rates to pickers, cotton production costs for farmers increased to 25%.

It appears that this measure was neither agreed nor negotiated with farmers. Numerous comments from farmers on social media channels suggest that the wage increase came as a surprise and provoked angry responses, as farmers had already been forced under threat of penalty to accept lower cotton purchase prices the previous month.

Despite the increase in the payment to cotton pickers from 1,500 (approximately \$0.11 US) to 2,500 UZS (approximately \$0.19 US) per kilo starting on October 9, it did not seem to have dramatically increased the number of voluntary cotton pickers, possibly because better paid work harvesting maize, peanuts and mung beans started in mid- October.

5.2 GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION ON COTTON PROCUREMENT PRICES

Although farmers now sign contracts with cotton textile clusters instead of the state, in the fall of 2024, the state returned to the practice of setting purchase prices and, through administrative pressure, forced farmers to agree to sell their cotton at a lower price than they had contractually agreed with clusters at the beginning of the year.

33 Telegram channel of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Uzbekistan, October 9, 2024: <https://t.me/uzagroministry/29834>

34 YouTube channel of Farmers of the Republic, *Cotton 2024: The harvest fee was announced as up to 2,500 soums*, October 9, 2024: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSfDJqB7Y5g>

By September 2024, cotton clusters across Uzbekistan claimed that they were unable to pay farmers the prices that they had contractually agreed to as a result of the fall in global cotton prices. On September 13, 2024, the government issued resolution No. 574 that set the purchase price for cotton at 6,800 UZS (approximately \$0.52 US) per kilo of cotton and offered farmers a subsidy of an additional 1,000 UZS (approximately \$0.08 US) per kilo.³⁵ Thus, the purchase price for all farmers of the republic was the same regardless of the original negotiated price and regardless of the cost of producing cotton for the farmers.

Based on this decision, local government officials (hokims) were instructed to ensure that farmers sign supplementary agreements with clusters, in which they had to accept 6,800 UZS per kilo of cotton. Farmers voiced strong concerns that the price would not cover their production costs and made the very valid point that if clusters were unable to pay the prices they had originally agreed to, the government should subsidize the clusters and not cancel the terms of valid contracts with farmers.

5.3 PRESSURE ON FARMERS TO ACCEPT A LOWER PRICE FOR THEIR COTTON

In an audio recording published by the Uzbek media outlet Kun.uz, the head of the Surkhandarya regional agriculture department, Rakhmatullo Gaffarov, can be heard instructing a district hokim to gather all farmers and make them sign additional agreements: “100% of the farmers must attend the meetings and sign. This is to fulfill the new Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 574. All previously signed agreements for 8,000-9,000 UZS (approximately \$0.60 - \$0.70 US) per kilo are canceled,” Gaffarov can be heard saying.³⁶

In response, the Ministry of Agriculture issued a vague statement, in which it was suggested that instructions to farmers to sign an additional agreement to their contracts was a “misunderstanding.”³⁷ “If a farmer is not ready to sell his production on the proposed terms, he has the opportunity to transfer the raw material to temporary cotton storage points. To do this, the farmer needs to conclude a temporary storage agreement with the cotton cluster [on condition of covering storage costs]. Under the temporary storage agreement, the raw material is registered electronically on the agricultural platform and the farmer can make a voluntary decision on when and to whom he sells his products – during or after the harvest. The ministry has not given any instructions to the regional administrations and their heads regarding the termination of cotton growers’ contracts or relations between farmers and clusters,” the statement said. However, as the ministry issued its statement, more than 90% of farmers throughout the country had already signed additional agreements, thereby surrendering their raw cotton for 6,800 UZS per kilo.

Although the Ministry of Agriculture claimed it had not given instructions to force farmers to sign additional contracts, the media reported on pressure on farmers from local authorities to agree to the lower price. In a leaked audio recording, the deputy hokim of Shavat district, Khorezm region, is heard addressing farmers that 13 farmers in the district had not signed the contract and were hiding from officials to avoid signing the additional agreement. The deputy hokim warned that these farmers would be worse off: “You won’t be able to sell your cotton to anyone. You will remain in debt. You will not be able to repay your loan, and you will be disgraced.” He added that farmers had to turn in 4% per day of their cotton production quota, and that if farmers failed to deliver on time, the hokimiyat would check the amount of rice that farmers had planted.³⁸ This amounts to a veiled threat that there would be a penalty such as destroying the rice.

35 Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 574, On measures to provide financial support to cotton producers, September 13, 2024: <https://lex.uz/docs/7103548>

36 Kun.uz, “Хамма фермер имзо қўйиб бериши керак” – пахта етиштирувчилар нархни туширишга мажбурланмоқда, September 24, 2024: <https://kun.uz/kr/news/2024/09/24/hamma-fermer-imzo-qoyib-berishi-kerak-paxta-yetishtiruvchilar-narxni-tushirishga-majburlanmoqda>

37 Statement by the Ministry of Agriculture, September 25, 2024: <https://gov.uz/oz/agro/news/view/22674>

38 Effect.uz, ПРОКУРАТУРА ТЕКШИРАДИ, ШАРМАНДАНГ ЧИҚАДИ: ХОРАЗМДА “ЗАМ” ҲОКИМ ФЕРМЕРЛАРНИ ҚЎРҚИТЯПТИ, September 20, 2024: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZNVsdAVL6M>

Several farmers in Khorezm region told Uzbek Forum that their cotton production costs were at least 8,300 UZS (approximately \$0.65 USD) per kilo and even with the subsidy they would not be able to break even. Nonetheless, clusters refused to accept cotton from farmers unless they signed an additional agreement with a reduced price.

Furthermore, farmers posted messages on social media that banks refused to release loans to farmers to pay the pickers unless they signed the additional agreements. Presidential Decree No. 205, adopted in December 2023, stipulated that the clusters would pay 80% of the contract price for cotton within 3 days of delivery to the clusters' cotton points and the remaining 20% by December 31.³⁹ The farmers were expected to pay the pickers from this 80% that clusters were obliged to pay but which many did not, leaving farmers unable to pay pickers. Since most clusters did not pay during the cotton harvest, farmers were offered to take out additional loans from the Agrobank at 10% interest. But in order to access these loans to pay pickers, farmers had to sign the additional agreement with clusters and accept a lower price for their cotton.

In response to a wave of outrage from farmers throughout the country, Chorikhon Kodirov, a leading lawyer for the Farmers' Council, suggested that farmers try to withdraw their signatures from the additional agreement to accept the reduced price for their cotton.

In a 30-minute interview with local media, Kodirov blamed the Ministry of Agriculture for the late clarification and said that it was not mandatory for farmers to sign the additional agreements. He proposed that farmers write a letter to the clusters pointing out that at the time of signing the additional agreement, farmers were not informed about the essence of the resolution issued on September 13, 2024.⁴⁰

Kodirov formulated a sample letter which was distributed on a farmers' dedicated Telegram channel for those wishing to terminate the supplementary agreement with the cluster.⁴¹ The letter stated, "I was not properly informed about the implications of Government Decree No. 574 and it was not explained to me that I had the opportunity to enter into a cotton storage contract with you [Ed. – the cluster], so I was forced to sign an additional contract under intimidation and pressure."

39 Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, *On additional measures for the further development of free market relations in agriculture*, December 12, 2023: <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/6693464>

40 Effect.uz, *ПАХТА СИЁСАТИ: ЧОРИХОН ҚОДИРОВ НИМА ДЕЙДИ?*, October 14, 2024: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tgEleQLw>

41 Telegram channel of Respublika Farmerlari, September 30, 2024: <https://t.me/RespublikaFarmerlari/377069>

SHORTAGE OF PICKERS

6.1 WAGES FOR PICKERS

Farmers, mahalla and hokimiyat staff interviewed by Uzbek Forum all said that recruitment of cotton pickers in the fall of 2024 was more difficult than in previous years. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, wages for cotton pickers were low compared to wages in other agricultural jobs. Farmers however were not able to increase payments to pickers because of their weak economic position caused by debts incurred from clusters, a cut in their agreed purchase price for cotton, and lack of access to cotton picking machinery to compensate for picker shortages.

The cotton harvest in Uzbekistan in 2024 lasted longer than usual and started on August 25-26 in southern regions and in some regions lasted until the end of November. Traditionally, the first month of the cotton harvest is the most important to attract pickers to the fields while the weather is favorable and earning potential is high. As the season progresses and weather conditions worsen with less cotton less to pick, it becomes more difficult to recruit pickers.

Cotton pickers' wages have not kept pace with sharp rises in fuel and food prices over the past two years and have remained stagnant at the 2022 rates of pay. At the same time, annual inflation in Uzbekistan averages 10% while some food prices have increased by 30-50% compared to 2022.⁴²

Until 2023, the state set minimum rates for cotton picking before it transferred the responsibility for negotiating pickers' wages to farmers. During the first month of cotton picking, farmers paid pickers based on their financial capacity and the purchase price of cotton which decreased to 7,800 UZS per kilo, including the government subsidy of 1,000 UZS, following the government decree of September 13, 2024.⁴³

In interviews with Uzbek Forum, cotton pickers said that for the past two years their hard work had been undervalued and that they were not willing to harvest cotton for the offered price. As a result, many people who would otherwise have been available and willing to pick cotton turned to other agricultural jobs that paid more. These included harvesting corn, mung beans, and nuts.

In mid-September, a video taken in Angor district of Surkhandarya region was posted online.⁴⁴ The video showed dozens of cotton pickers leaving a farmer's field after learning how much they would be paid. "Last year we were paid 2,000 UZS (approximately \$0.15 US) per kilo, but since then food has become more expensive. How could this year's payment drop to 1,600 UZS (approximately \$0.12 US)?" the woman says.

One picker in Khorezm region told monitors that she would no longer go out to pick cotton in early October for fear of getting sick in the cold weather. "Drugs in pharmacies are very expensive. You can spend all the money you earn on medical treatment, and I would like to avoid this," she said.

To combat the shortage of pickers, large farms rented machinery for harvesting, but cotton harvesting equipment was clearly insufficient to meet demand. In an interview with Uzbek Forum, a farmer in Jizzakh region said that farmers sometimes fought over machinery.

42 *Gazeta.uz, Инфляция в Узбекистане за 2024 год: как изменились цены, January 2, 2025:*
<https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2025/01/02/inflation/>

43 *Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 574, On measures to provide financial support to cotton producers, September 13, 2024:* <https://lex.uz/docs/7103548>

44 *Fermer.uz, 1 КГ=1600 СЎМ: ТЕРИМЧИЛАР ДАЛАНИ ОММАВИЙ ТАРК ЭТИШДИ!, September 16, 2024:*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qu9mSitXYTc>

There is no public data to determine how much cotton was harvested by machine in 2024, but in recent years machine harvesting has gradually increased and, according to some estimates, the total cotton crop that was machine harvested in 2024 was approximately 20%.

A government-sponsored video issued by the Buston district of Andijan region hokimiyat extolled the benefits of machine harvesting.⁴⁵ “One harvesting machine can harvest 15 hectares of cotton in one day, whereas 150 pickers have to work for three days to pick 10 hectares of cotton,” reported a representative of the hokimiyat.

Uzbek Forum recorded an interview with a farmer in Rishton district of Fergana region who said that at the beginning of October, over a period of five to six days, traffic police stopped mini-buses in which villagers, mostly women traveling to the farms of non-cotton farmers, and asked the women to return and harvest the cotton in the districts they had come from.

In several districts in Fergana region, deputy hokims for women’s affairs were responsible for organizing the cotton harvest. During the cotton harvest officials regularly went to the fields along with the staff of mahallas, visited residents to disseminate messages aimed at attracting pickers, and looked for sponsors to provide incentive gifts for the best pickers such as TVs, carpets, and fabrics.

6.2 ROLE OF MAHALLA IN THE RECRUITMENT OF COTTON PICKERS

The institution of the mahalla is presented by the state as a self-governing body of citizens, whose management structure is the so-called “mahalla’s seven.” It consists of a mahalla chairman, an assistant hokim, a youth leader, a women’s rights activist, a prevention inspector, a social worker and a tax inspector, whose responsibilities and tasks are defined by presidential decree.⁴⁶ The tasks of mahalla employees include ensuring the improvement of the mahalla, “promoting national values”, “preserving a healthy social and spiritual atmosphere” and other organizational and advisory activities aimed at “solving the problems of the population at the primary level”. One of the tasks of the mahalla is the compilation of documents of those receiving social assistance and the allocation of welfare and child allowances to residents. This gives mahallas considerable leverage in the recruitment of pickers. Among the tasks listed in the decree, nothing indicates that mahalla employees should be involved in the organization of cotton pickers. Nonetheless, mahalla employees are traditionally responsible for recruiting cotton pickers among low-income and unemployed villagers in their communities.

During the 2024 cotton harvest, mahalla staff had to regularly report to hokims on the number of cotton pickers they had recruited and were subjected to enormous pressure due to the shortage of pickers. One mahalla employee, whose job it was to raise awareness among residents to encourage them to harvest cotton and who regularly participated in meetings at the Andijan district hokimiyat, told Uzbek Forum that farmers and mahalla employees bear the brunt of cotton picking. “Villagers are exempted from the duty to pick cotton which has resulted in an acute shortage of pickers. Residents told me that they did not want to pick cotton for the money offered, but the hokimiyat kept demanding that we find pickers.”

An employee of the Andijan district hokimiyat said that she had to travel to the fields together with mahalla employees to control the number of pickers coming out from each mahalla. “By the end of the day, I had to do a report on the number of pickers and the amount of cotton picked and send it to the hokimiyat. The reports on the progress of cotton picking were reviewed at evening meetings. It was so tiring after a whole day’s work to stay up at night meetings,” she said.⁴⁷

45 Telegram channel of Hokimiyat of Buston district, Andijan region, September 11, 2024: <https://t.me/bostonpress/55290>

46 Presidential Decree, *On measures to radically enhance the role of the institution of the mahalla in society and to ensure its functioning as the primary means of resolving the problems of the population*, December 25, 2023: <https://lex.uz/docs/6707809#6710001>

47 Interview with Andijan district employee, November 17, 2024. On file with Uzbek Forum.

During one such meeting held in Andijan district hokimiyat on October 3, 2024, Karimjon Kamolov, chairman of the mahalla, became ill and died in an ambulance before reaching the hospital. According to an employee of the mahalla who personally knew the deceased, “Among the chairmen of mahallas are mostly elderly people. It is really physically difficult for them to organize the search for pickers every day, and then listen to the insults and abuse by the hokim in the evenings.”⁴⁸

Apparently keen to avoid public criticism for the incident, the Andijan district hokimiyat quickly published an official statement in which it claimed that the meeting attended by the deceased mahalla chairman had not been dedicated to cotton harvesting.⁴⁹ “Issues related to cotton harvesting are solved online through the Zoom platform,” the statement said. This claim however was refuted by an audio recording that was subsequently published in the media.⁵⁰

The pressure exerted on mahalla employees by hokimiyats led to further acts of coercion. Some mahalla committee leaders resorted to threats to stop paying child allowances to families whose households refused to go to the cotton fields. Local media published several audio messages that mahalla chairmen sent to residents receiving child allowances.⁵¹

Lazizbek Urakov, the mahalla chairman of Shakhrisabz district in Kashkadarya region, said in the audio message he sent to the Telegram group of mahalla residents, “Dear residents, we are forming lists of those who receive child allowances and will compare them with the list of those who go out to collect cotton. I warn those who do not go out to pick, that your payment of child allowances may be discontinued.”

The Uzbek Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction reported that the State Labor Inspectorate conducted an inspection after the statement by Urakov was made public.⁵² Urakov was subsequently fined 19 million UZS (approximately \$1,460 US) for “coercion to labor” (Article 51 of the Administrative Code of Uzbekistan).

There is only one case of the punishment of a mahalla chairman that was made publicly known under the administrative article “coercion to labor” related to cotton harvesting in 2024. Although it is a positive sign that the law has, at least in this case, been implemented, the Labor Inspectorate stopped short of investigating the underlying reasons that prompted the mahalla chairman to threaten to stop social assistance to citizens.

In numerous interviews with Uzbek Forum, mahalla staff reported that they were under enormous pressure from the district hokimiyat officials to find pickers. Mahalla employees said they were faced with the impossible task of recruiting sufficient numbers of residents to the cotton fields when there were not enough residents willing to pick cotton voluntarily. Mahalla employees said they had no personal interest in recruiting pickers and that for them it was an annual duty which they were unable to refuse.

48 Interview with mahalla employee, Andijan district, Andijan region, October 7, 2024. On file with Uzbek Forum.

49 Statement of the Andijan district hokimiyat, October 3, 2024:

<https://telegra.ph/Munosabat-Andizhon-tumanida-kuzatilgan-%D2%B3olat-b%D1%9Ejicha-10-03>

50 Ozodlik, *Majburiy mehnat qaytdi: Hokimlar yana hammani paxtaga haydayapti*, October 15, 2024:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6b8BrTwanxQ>

51 Telegram channel of Rost24, October 9, 2024: https://t.me/rost_24uz/10563

52 Telegram channel of the Ministry of Poverty Alleviation and Employment, October 10, 2024:

<https://t.me/mehnatvazirligi/17701>

6.3 PRESSURE ON FARMERS TO FIND PICKERS

“ If the cluster fulfilled its contractual obligations by paying farmers within three days and 80% in advance, farmers would have the means to pay the pickers and not have to take loans to pay them. ”

Farmer, Shovot district, Khorezm.⁵³

Farmers are in an economically dire situation and vulnerable to pressure from officials who demand that they increase the pace of harvesting despite the fact that farmers cannot attract pickers by raising their wages due to low cotton purchase prices. A farmer from Pop district in Namangan told Uzbek Forum monitors that in mid-September, in desperation, she approached the police chief to ask him to bring in civil servants to pick cotton. The official replied that he no longer had the authority to force employees to pick cotton. The farmer confirmed that in previous years her field had been harvested by employees of the water management organization who had been forcibly mobilized by the Pop district hokimiyat.⁵⁴

The pressure on farmers and their inability to respond to the shortage of pickers was documented throughout the country. According to one farmer from Andijan district in Andijan region, “In the hokimiyat they demand that we find pickers even ‘from under the ground.’ This year the purchase price of cotton has fallen. In our district, 90% will not be able to pay for the cost of producing cotton. Soon the tax inspection will start demanding we pay our taxes. They are not interested whether there was any income. The tax inspector will take the case to court, and then they will do an inventory of the farmer’s property and confiscate it.”⁵⁵

On October 17, BBC Uzbek Service published a report about the acute shortage of pickers.⁵⁶ Two days previously, Radio Ozodlik published a report titled “Forced Labor is Back”, based on the dozens of letters and messages they had received.⁵⁷ The report included a recording, probably made covertly during a meeting at the hokimiyat, Andijan district hokim, Bobirbek Yuldashev, is heard speaking to his subordinates and farmers in a raised voice, saying that he needed cotton at all costs and threatened to confiscate the land from the farmers who failed to meet the quota. In the same article, Ozodlik also quoted an interview with a farmer present at the meeting, who said that Yuldashev demanded that farmers meet unrealistically high quotas of up to 45 centners per hectare, insulted farmers with abusive language, and demanded that farmers who disagreed should write an application for the ‘voluntary’ transfer of their land to the state.

Farmers in Fergana region reported that police officers confiscated the vehicles of farmers who did not deliver sufficient quantities of cotton, promising to give them back on condition that they increased the rates for cotton picking to attract more pickers and thus fulfill their production targets. In Uchkuprik district of Fergana region, vehicles were temporarily confiscated from at least three farmers. In Dangara district in Fergana region, most evening meetings on the pace of the harvest were held in the district police building. According to a farmer who attended the meetings during the harvest, at least two farmers were detained without charge for three days for not delivering enough cotton after receiving a warning.⁵⁸

53 Interview with a farmer, Shovot district, Khorezm region, October 26, 2024. On file with Uzbek Forum.

54 Audio message from a farmer in Pop District, September 13, 2024. Audio recording on file with Uzbek Forum.

55 Interview with farmer, Andijan district, Andijan region, November 4, 2024. On file with Uzbek Forum.

56 BBC Uzbek, *Терилмаётган пахталар – Ўзбекистонда пахтаинг куни битаяптими?*, October 17, 2024: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cclYA2UNCkk>

57 Ozodlik, *Majburiy mehnat qaytdi: Hokimlar yana hammani paxtaga haydayapti*, October 15, 2024: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6b8BrTwanxQ>

58 Interview with a farmer in Dangara district, Fergana region, November 2, 2024. On file with Uzbek Forum.

Radio Ozodlik quoted an interview with a farmer from Payarik district in Samarkand region, in which the farmer described an 'unusual' way of pressurizing farmers. The farmer said that in their village, residents went out to collect mung beans. The farmer said that on the morning of October 8, he was summoned to the district police. "Besides me, four other farmers were sitting there. A police officer named Sherzod insulted us with abusive language for two hours and said that if we did not collect all the cotton, he would put us in jail. They drew up a protocol that we were urinating in a public place and the police made us all sign the protocol. We were then escorted to the courthouse, but the judge either did not believe them or doubted such a silly accusation and rejected the charge," said the farmer.⁵⁹

On November 1, the online media outlet Kun.uz published an audio recording from a meeting where the hokim of Bayavut district of Syrdarya region, Dilfuza Uralova, was heard insulting a farmer and, judging by the audio recording, tried to assault him, while some media reported that she had used "used physical force."⁶⁰ The hokim was furious that the farmer had failed to meet the cotton quota although the farmer explained that he was busy planting wheat and asked the hokim not to insult him. The conversation between the hokim and the farmer reveals an unacceptable level of abuse and threat:

"Bastard, do I have to go and make you pick [Ed. – cotton] yourself? Why don't you do it? Why don't you do it?! Is it easier for you to listen to reproach? Why could you not manage the cotton harvest...? Damn your father, you donkey!"

The farmer is heard asking the hokim not to insult his late father: "Do you know when my father died? Don't touch my father," to which she replies, "I will touch, I will touch a hundred times, you shameless scoundrel. Why didn't you do as you were supposed to?"

After the conflict, the farmer was taken out of the room where the meeting was held. Dilfuza Uralova instructed her employee to inform the police "to have the farmer's hands and feet bound and to take him into custody."

After this incident was publicized in the media, the hokimiyat of Syrdarya region commented on the incident.⁶¹ The statement said that the ethics commission of the regional hokimiyat had considered the actions of the hokim as a "violation of ethical norms and rules of behavior of a public servant."

Judging by the hundreds of comments left by farmers in Telegram groups, their financial situation worsened in the fall of 2024. The chronic non-payment by clusters to farmers for grain and cotton further weakened their ability to pay pickers rates high enough to incentivize voluntary picking. During 2024, dozens of cotton-textile clusters were declared bankrupt which resulted in the impoverishment of farmers who were forced to supply grain and cotton to insolvent clusters under threat of land seizure.

A dedicated Telegram channel for providing advice to farmers called on the Prosecutor General's Office to investigate the activities of clusters that had declared bankruptcy.⁶² "Billions of state funds may be being embezzled. It is necessary to investigate all clusters in the republic being declared bankrupt." The post gives an example of one cluster in the Shimbay district of Karakalpakstan, which was declared bankrupt by a court in September 2024. The cluster signed contracts with more than 100 farmers to supply grain and never paid them.

59 Ozodlik, *Majburiy mehnat qaytdi: Hokimlar yana hammani paxtaga haydayapti*, October 15, 2024: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6b8BrTwanxQ>

60 Kun.uz, *Боёвут ҳокими Дилфуза Уралова фермерни ҳақоратлаб, ИИБга уни қамаб қўйишни буюрди*, November 1, 2024: <https://kun.uz/kr/73985061>

61 Telegram channel of the Syrdarya regional hokimiyat, November 1, 2024: <https://t.me/SirdaryoUz/25239>

62 Fermerga Madad Telegram channel, November 16, 2024: https://t.me/fermerga_madad/2447 ,

VULNERABILITY AND EXPLOITATION OF FARMERS

7.1 CLUSTER DEBTS TO FARMERS FOR COTTON

Since 2022, clusters' debts to farmers for supplied cotton and grain has been one of the most pressing problems for farmers. The presidential decree issued at the end of December 2023 provided for a mechanism to pay farmers for cotton they delivered during the 2024 harvest.⁶³ According to the decree, farmers were to receive 80% of the payment for cotton delivered within 3 days and the remaining 20% by December 31, 2024.

During an online Zoom conference organized by farmers in September 2024, Davron Vakhobov, Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, promised farmers that the cotton payment situation in 2024 would improve considerably.⁶⁴ "This year", he said, "the state intends to bring in the National Guard to oversee the cotton ginning plants of debtor clusters so that cotton fiber does not leave the cotton delivery points before the clusters have paid farmers 80% of the contract price in accordance with the presidential decree. The clusters say that they [Ed. –the government] are interfering in their affairs, that they are independent businesses, but if they are in debt, the government reserves the right of control."

It seems that neither such statements nor the decree itself had any positive impact on the vast majority of farmers. In the course of December, dozens of farmers' appeals to the country's leadership appeared in social networks demanding that clusters pay for their cotton crop.



Farmers appeal to the President of Uzbekistan to help them with the problem of chronic non - payment for cotton they supply to the district cluster . Kamashi district, Kashkadarya region December 13 , 2024 . Source : Screenshot from video @Antikor_uz : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6UP56f0MWGY>

63 Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan *On additional measures for the further development of free market relations in agriculture*, December 12, 2023: <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/6693464>

64 Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 574, *On measures to provide financial support to cotton producers*, September 13, 2024: <https://lex.uz/docs/7103548>



Caricature of a cotton cluster published by satirical magazine Mushtum . September 20 , 2024 . ©Hasanboy Sultonov .

In a video published on YouTube on December 13, several farmers made impassioned appeals that they could not pay cotton pickers because they had not received payment for the crop.⁶⁵

We are appealing to the president because the cluster has not made the 80% advance payment and that's why we were not able to pay cotton pickers on time. It resulted in a situation where we could not complete the harvest and repay our loans.

I, Tohir Bobo Urayotov, am the head of the farm Tuirov Elyor. After we delivered our cotton to the Oqsaroy Cluster, they did not pay us the harvest money. We delivered all the cotton according to the contract. We produced the excess cotton, and the cluster convinced us to sell it to them, saying that they would put it on the exchange by December 1. They did not give us the harvest money for the excess cotton we delivered before December 1. We are still dealing with this problem. We ask for your practical help.

I, Bozorov Bakhtiyor, am the head of the Bozorboboy Farm. We all have the same problem – we have not been paid for the harvest. We have not been given 80% of the cotton money. Women cotton pickers come to our house asking for their wages and are not leaving us alone. We ask you to provide us with practical help to receive the harvest money and to pay back our loan. We don't even know who to turn to for this. They evaluate the grade as they wish. Out of 26 tons of cotton, three tons were deducted as waste, which is 15%. We don't even know what to say to them...

I, Shodmon Shamsiyev, am the head of the Kurgantepa Paxta Xirmoni farm. We are appealing to you regarding the cotton harvest. We have been harvesting cotton for 70 days now, and we still have not received a single soum. Conflicts with the pickers are occurring every day. We ask for your practical assistance.

65 Antikor.uz, ҚАТОР ФЕРМЕРЛАР ПРЕЗИДЕНТГА ВА БОШ ПРОКУРОРГА МУРОЖААТ БИЛАН ЧИҚИШДИ, December 13, 2024: https://www.youtube.com/@Antikor_uz

At the time of writing, it is not clear how many clusters had paid farmers in full by December 31, 2024, as stipulated by decree. A farmer from Namangan region said that she had not received payment for her cotton and could not pay her taxes.⁶⁶ As a result, the bank was imposing a fine every day for the delay. However, another farmer from Takhiatash district of Karakalpakstan said she had received full payment from the cluster for her cotton and had also received the government subsidy.⁶⁷

Local Telegram channels published a letter signed by farmers in Oltinkul district of Andijan region: “At the beginning of the year, 46 farmers from our district signed a futures contract with the Skorton Textile LLC cluster in Balykchi district. When the cotton ripened, before it was harvested, the hokimiyat forced the cluster to cancel the contract, and under various threats, forced the farmers to sign a contract with the Kadir Textile cluster, which has not paid us for the second year.”⁶⁸

In an interview with Uzbek Forum, a farmer from Oltinkul district Andijan region said that due to lack of funds they could not raise the payment to pickers, who were told in October by the hokimiyat that farmers were supposed to pay 2,500 UZS per kilo. The pickers then left to pick cotton for farmers who were better-off and were offering higher rates.⁶⁹

7.2 THREATS OF LAND SEIZURE

From November, farmers began to complain in social networks about threats of land seizure due to their failure to fulfill contractual production obligations to clusters, although this is not provided for by Uzbek legislation.

Dedicated farmers’ Telegram channels such as Fermerga Madad published dozens of messages from farmers concerning threats from hokims and prosecutors to seize their land for failure to meet their quotas.

In an audio message from the hokim of Yakkabog district of Kashkadarya region, he can be heard saying that land lease agreements will be terminated with farmers who fail to meet the cotton production quota. “Today the land lease agreement with two farmers was terminated. By evening two more farmers will have their agreements terminated. There is a responsibility for planting a little cotton.”⁷⁰

There is no legislation that stipulates that agricultural land may be seized for failure to fulfill contractual production obligations. Nonetheless, district hokims often use pressure and threats to force farmers to ‘voluntarily’ terminate their land lease agreements. In August 2022, a presidential decree was passed stipulating that a farmer’s voluntary termination of a land lease agreement is only valid if notarized.⁷¹ This measure was intended to prevent cases where farmers might be coerced into terminating their leases and notaries are tasked with the responsibility for verifying that farmers are acting voluntarily. However, in some districts, notaries are afraid to oppose the demands of hokims and verify these documents although they are aware that farmers are submitting them under pressure.

In response to reports of farmers being forced to write statements on ‘voluntary termination of the land lease agreement,’ the Farmers’ Council issued a statement that these ‘voluntary terminations’ were signed under pressure and are not valid, even if they are notarized.⁷² “We have received information from Dustlik district in Jizzakh region and Bagdad district in Fergana region that notaries are confirming applications for termination of land lease agreements signed by farmers ‘voluntarily –

66 Audio message and documents from a farmer in Namangan region, January 4, 2025. On file with Uzbek Forum.

67 Interview with a farmer from Takhiatash district, Karakalpakstan, January 6, 2025. On file with Uzbek Forum.

68 Message posted on Bastion Telegram channel, September 18, 2024: <https://t.me/bastiongr/12494>

69 Interview with a farmer, Oltinkul district, Andijan region, October 10, 2024. On file with Uzbek Forum.

70 Fermerga Madad Telegram channel, October 24, 2024: https://t.me/fermerga_madad/2394

71 Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, *On measures to reliably protect the inviolability of property rights, prevent unjustified interference in property relations, and increase the level of capitalization of private property*, August 24, 2022: <https://lex.uz/uz/docs/6171346>

72 Message posted by Telegram channel of Fermerga Madad, October 23, 2024: <https://lex.uz/uz/docs/6171346>

under duress.” On October 23, 2024, the Farmers’ Council sent an appeal to the Ministry of Justice and the General Prosecutor’s Office requesting an inspection of the notarization process under the prosecutor’s supervision.

Chorikhon Kodirov, a lawyer of the Farmers’ Council, said in an interview with the local media that despite the obvious illegal actions of hokims confiscating farmers’ land, administrative courts had failed and were unable to offer protection from injustice: “I want to give an example from Syrdarya region, a story which circulated in social networks the other day. The district hokim appealed to the court with a claim to terminate a long-term land lease agreement with a farmer. Almost all the documents attached to the lawsuit were fake. What should be done about it? Administrative courts do not fulfill their tasks, they support illegal decisions of hokims. No matter how much we support farmers, if the court makes an illegal decision, we can’t do anything about it. The court is the highest instance. I can only express my dissatisfaction, but nothing more”, he said.⁷³

7.3 APPEAL OF UZBEK FARMERS TO THE PRESIDENT

On November 11, 2024, a group of farmers sent an open appeal to the President of Uzbekistan in which they summarized the accumulated problems in Uzbekistan’s agriculture sector and asked to start consultations with farmers to correct the situation.⁷⁴ The appeal was initially signed by 14 farmers and has been signed by dozens more since. Their demands were as follows:

- Abolish the concept of ‘specialized farming’ and allow farmers themselves to decide the profile of the direction of farming.⁷⁵
- Abolish the forced placement of agricultural products and allow farmers to sell their crops on the free market without attaching farmers to a particular location.
- Stop interference by authorities and law enforcement agencies in contractual relations between farmers and cotton-textile and grain clusters.
- Penalize local officials for pressuring farmers to change terms of contracts with clusters.
- Increase financial control over clusters to ensure timely payment for the products that farmers supply to them as stipulated by law.
- Ensure equal opportunities for cotton production cooperatives and cotton clusters and extend the benefits and subsidies received by clusters to cooperatives as well.
- Develop a fair online rating system for continuous monitoring of clusters’ activity on fulfillment of their contractual obligations.
- Stop forcing cotton and grain farmers to grow silkworm cocoons and promote the development of specialized farms focused on cocoon production.
- Assist in radical changes in the activities of the Council of Farmers and Dekhkans so that the organization protects the interests of farmers rather than officials.
- Promote the formation of independent associations of farms and cooperatives in which the governing bodies would be chosen by farmers themselves.
- Establish a working group to study the spending of public funds allocated for drainage and canal cleaning and increase quality control over the work.

At the time of writing, the government has not yet responded to the farmers’ appeal.

73 Effect.uz, ПАХТА СИЁСАТИ: ЧОРИХОН ҚОДИРОВ НИМА ДЕЙДИ?, October 14, 2024: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tgEleKQLw>

74 Appeal of farmers, Telegram channel of Fermerga Madad, November 11, 2024: https://t.me/fermerga_madad/2439

75 ‘Specialized farming’ is the practice of allocating land for specific agricultural purposes, including the cultivation of specific crops. It applies to all farms and is stipulated in land leases and cannot be changed. For example, if the land was designated for livestock farming, it cannot be used to grow grain, or vice versa.

7.4 PROSPECTS FOR PROFITABLE COTTON PRODUCTION

Despite the many challenges facing Uzbekistan's cotton farmers, mainly due to government interference and insecurity of tenure, some have been able to demonstrate that cotton production can be a profitable business.

According to agricultural expert Kamoliddin Ikramov, out of about 29,000 farmers who are obliged under their land leases to produce cotton and grain, more than 4,000 have grown cotton using their own funds without state support. According to Ikramov, this is more profitable than binding themselves to contractual obligations with a cluster that receives the cotton but does not pay on time or even at all.⁷⁶

Most of the farmers interviewed by Uzbek Forum monitors were very pessimistic about the current situation in the cotton sector due to the fall of the cotton price. One farmer from Oltinkul district in Andijan region said, "This year was very difficult. Next year I think will be even more difficult. The price of cotton is very low. It does not cover our expenses. We can only cover our expenses if we get at least 40 quintals of cotton per hectare. But it is very difficult. Previously, the loan for cotton cultivation was given at 3% per annum. Now it is 12%. Why so much? We grow cotton because the state wants us to. It is necessary to reduce expenses for mineral fertilizers, fuel and lubricants. I can't get enough workers for weeding – there is no money to pay them. In our district, 60-70% of farmers probably couldn't fulfill the quota. Since October 9, the government has set the rate for pickers at 2,500 UZS per kilo, which means even more expenses for cotton. I don't know if I can attract pickers for this money. There is a lot of cotton, but there is no one to pick it and a lot of cotton remains unharvested in the fields."⁷⁷

Five cotton farmers from various districts of Andijan region who spoke to Uzbek Forum said that in 2024 they grew cotton with their own funds and had no obligations to the clusters. These are farmers who have large farms or farmers who have joined together in cooperatives. According to one of these farmers, they did not previously believe in the viability of cooperatives, but that they could now see that instead of delivering cotton to clusters at a set price, there was an opportunity to earn more money by selling fiber and cotton as intermediate products on the exchange.

As one farmer pointed out, "In our district several farmers have grown cotton at their own expense. They have their own buyers who took the cotton directly from the field. This way it is possible to make money on cotton. Next year I am not signing an agreement with the cluster again. It means that the state will not allocate a loan at 12% but I will try, because if I don't take a loan, I can then sell the cotton to whoever I want."⁷⁸

76 Kun.uz, "Айрим фермерлар қаматиб юбориш билан қўрқитиляпти". Мутахассислар – пахта нархи пасайиши ҳақида, September 23, 2024: <https://kun.uz/kr/news/2024/09/23/ayrim-fermerlar-qamatib-yuborish-bilan-qorqitilyapti-mutaxassislar-paxta-narxi-pasayishi-haqida>

77 Interview with farmer, Oltinkul district, Andijan region, November 9, 2024. On file with Uzbek Forum.

78 Interview with a farmer from Oltinkul district, Andijan region, November 29, 2024. On file with Uzbek Forum.

CONCLUSION

The Uzbek government's significant progress to eliminate state-imposed forced labor in the cotton sector is at risk of being undermined through stalling of the reforms envisaged in the government's agricultural development strategy which included, among other things, the abolition of the "practice of crop placement by the state" by the first quarter of 2023.

The continued government control over cotton production and exclusion of farmers as entrepreneurs with equal relationships with cotton buyers create exploitative practices and policies that contribute to the persistent risk of state-imposed forced labor when farmers cannot afford to pay pickers and officials are obliged to ensure timely harvests of de facto quotas.

Land tenure insecurity, abuse of power by officials, and systematic delay or non-payment for cotton by clusters, fuel the exploitation of farmers who risk either losing their land for failure to meet de facto quotas or falling into debt.

The system of forced crop placement that serves no other purpose than to produce the maximum amount of cotton (or grain) on a given piece of land serves as the basis for de facto quotas which every official in every district is obliged to ensure are fulfilled under threat of penalty. These threats increase the risk that officials turn to state-imposed forced labor as the only alternative to avoiding those penalties.

The elimination of state-imposed forced labor in the cotton fields can only be sustained when accompanied by continued structural reforms in the agricultural sector, underpinned by civil and political reforms that embrace freedoms of association and speech. By failing to uphold these reforms and implementing decrees designed to address the remaining problems, President Mirziyoyev risks undermining the progress that has been achieved to date.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Uzbekistan:

- Abolish forced crop placement to avoid the obligation of officials and farmers to fulfill de facto quotas.
- Abolish the system of specialized farming and allow farmers to decide what agricultural products are best suited to their land.
- Ensure an equitable marketplace for both cotton farmers and clusters by desisting from unwarranted interference in contractual relations that put farmers at an unfair competitive advantage.
- Implement mechanisms to ensure timely payments by clusters to farmers.
- Ensure international investments to modernize the agriculture sector equally benefit all farmers and increase access to machinery and technical capacity.
- Abolish mandatory membership of the Farmers' Council for farmers and create an enabling environment for freedom of association including registration of independent farmers' associations.
- Ensure rule of law and legal certainty before the courts, particularly with regard to land allocation.
- Engage in negotiations with farmers who are articulating their demands of the Uzbek government on how to reform the relationship between farmers and the state and restructure agricultural production that ensures a sustainable cotton industry.
- Implement stated commitments to reforms that create an enabling environment for civil society and ensure unobstructed independent monitoring and reporting.

To international development banks and donor institutions:

- Condition investments and financial support for Uzbekistan's agriculture sector on structural reforms that prioritize the needs and challenges facing farmers.
- Advocate for the abolition of the forced crop placement system and its replacement through the introduction of incentives instead of threat of penalty for the cultivation of strategic crops.
- Communicate to the Uzbek government that modernization of the agriculture sector cannot be achieved without reforming the relationship between farmers and the state and ensuring security of land tenure.
- Reiterate to the Uzbek government the importance of an even application of the law to foster investor confidence in all sectors of the Uzbek economy.
- Remind the Uzbek government that fundamental freedoms such as freedoms of association and speech are necessary preconditions for informing policy, assessing risk, ensuring meaningful stakeholder engagement, strengthening reforms and facilitating independent monitoring and reporting.
- Ensure strong safeguards and compliance in investments in Uzbekistan's agriculture sector, in particular with regard to land rights and the rights of workers and farmers.

To brands and retailers that use cotton:

- Convey to the Uzbek government and the textile industry that unobstructed independent monitoring and reporting on labor rights — both by independent monitors and workers — and freedom of association and collective bargaining protections for workers and farmers are essential to encourage responsible sourcing of cotton products from Uzbekistan.
- Exercise human rights due diligence in all aspects of engagement with the Uzbek textile industry, from evaluating its commercial attractiveness to establishing and maintaining commercial relationships with Uzbek clusters. The vertical integration of the Uzbek supply chain requires brands to conduct human rights due diligence to identify, prevent, mitigate, and account for adverse human rights impacts at all levels of production, including the cotton farms controlled by the supplier clusters, their spinners, fabric mills, and cut-make-trim units.
- Actively commit to furthering freedom of association and collective bargaining. Support workers' and farmers' efforts to organize and assert collective agency.
- Adhere to responsible purchasing practices that enable those involved in all tiers of the supply chain to offer decent work, including offering employment contracts, and paying a living wage to their workers.
- Engage in good faith with the Cotton Campaign coalition and explore the possibility of sourcing through the Framework for Responsible Sourcing that was developed in consultation with the coalition members, including brand associations and civil society partners, and which reflects the Cotton Campaign's ongoing engagement with the government of Uzbekistan, Uzbek cotton producers, and global brands and retailers.⁷⁹ Key elements of the Framework include capacity building and contributing to an enabling environment for labor rights; implementation of ILO standards at all levels of the textile supply chain; independent grievance mechanisms and access to effective remedy; accountability at both supplier and buyer levels, and co-governance.

79 Cotton Campaign website: <https://www.cottoncampaign.org/>



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