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Forced Labor Persists in Uzbek Cotton Harvest

By Catherine Putz
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The cotton harvest is underway in Central Asia again, and in due course citizens in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are being coerced into picking cotton. In the U.S. State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons report, released in late July, Uzbekistan was graced with an upgrade, ostensibly for making progress with regard to child labor.

In the report, the U.S. State Department writes that the “Government of Uzbekistan does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so.”

Many Central Asia watchers and human rights organizations questioned the upgrade. The Cotton Campaign, which is a coalition of organizations committed to ending forced labor in Uzbekistan’s cotton industry, denounced the move and noted that the “unwarranted decision decreases pressure on the authorities in Tashkent to end forced labor.”

The report’s recommendations for Uzbekistan include stopping the use of child labor, ceasing to compel adults to labor, and allowing civil society to monitor the harvest. In the latter two areas, Uzbekistan appears to be failing.

Less than two months before the report was issued, well-known Uzbek human rights activist Eleana Uraleva was detained and abused by police after she was caught photographing people forced to work in cotton fields.

As the cotton harvest moves forward, reports have surfaced indicating that little has changed with regard to adults being forced to pick cotton. The Cotton Campaign notes that the Uzbek government has committed to “promote voluntary recruitment and to prevent mobilization of teachers and healthcare workers for the cotton harvest.” Yet Vice News carried a report last week that says high school and college students have been coerced into signing “voluntary” contracts to work in the fields.

The Uzbek-German Forum, a human rights organization that is part of the Cotton Campaign’s coalition and is monitoring the harvest, reported on September 4:

In Kashkadarya region, administrators of several hospitals required staff to sign a commitment to perform agricultural work and an undated resignation letter. One document read, “I (NAME) commit to actively participate in public and agricultural work. In case of failure to do so, I agree to be dismissed. This document has been written by me.” The other read, “It is my request to resign from this post.” Hospital staff report their concern that if they refuse to pick cotton, a date will be added to the resignation letter to fire them at “their own will.”

So much for ceasing to compel adults to pick cotton. And as for allowing civil society to monitor the harvest?

On September 24, Human Rights Watch reported that on September 21, “police detained and beat a prominent rights activist, Dmitry Tikhonov, as he was documenting people being sent to the cotton fields.” Two days earlier, Elena Urlaeva and others, including her husband and 11-year old son, were detained. In both cases, the police arrested, intimidated, and ultimately released them without charge. HRW notes that Urlaeva has been detained four times in the last four months.