

TIME FOR

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CHANGE

Forced Labor in Turkmenistan Cotton 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Turkmenistan is one of the most closed and repressive countries in the world, with a system of arbitrary, corrupt governance that controls nearly every aspect of public life. It is the tenth-largest producer of cotton in the world and exports cotton lint, yarn, fabric, and finished goods. The government maintains complete control over the cotton production system, which is predicated on the coercion and exploitation of tens of thousands of tenant farmers, public sector employees, and others to produce and harvest cotton for the benefit of corrupt elites. Every year, the government imposes cotton production quotas on farmers and enforces them with the threat of penalty, including fines and loss of land. It controls all essential inputs for cotton production, including seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, agricultural machinery, fuel, and access to irrigation, and sets the price at which farmers must sell their crop to the state.

Every year during the harvest, which takes place between August and December, the Turkmen government forces tens of thousands of public sector workers, including employees of schools, kindergartens, hospitals and clinics, utilities, public agencies, and state-owned factories to pick cotton or pay for replacement pickers under threat of penalty, including loss of employment or

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

Amsterdam-based Turkmen.news is a long-time partner of the Cotton Campaign and has monitored forced labor in cotton production in Turkmenistan for ten years.

Vienna-based Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) is a leading voice on human rights issues in Turkmenistan and has published first-hand monitoring on a range of rights issues for years on its Chronicles of Turkmenistan website.



School and kindergarten teachers submit cotton to be weighed, Dashoguz region. October 2022. Photo by Turkmen.News

reduction of work hours or pay, and extorts money from the same workers to pay expenses related to the harvest.

This government-controlled monopoly-monopsony system has contributed to the enrichment of corrupt elites while driving poverty and child labor. The system of labor exploitation has also had devastating effects on the delivery of essential public services, such as healthcare and education, by taking public employees out of their jobs and into the fields. This cotton produced and harvested with forced labor, colloquially known as “white gold,” finds several ways to enter global supply chains. Cotton lint, yarn, and fabric are exported to production countries such as Turkey, Pakistan, and Portugal, and finished goods, like towels and bed linens, are sold in the US, Canada, and Europe despite forced labor import bans, due diligence requirements, and other laws regulating or restricting the use of forced labor in supply chains.

In Turkmenistan, harvesting cotton using forced labor is not an anomaly, but an integral part of a command system of agricultural production, the exploitative practices of which extend to the harvest of wheat, silk cocoons, and other products. Public sector employees are forcibly mobilized not only to pick cotton but also to carry out thinning, weeding, and topping of cotton plants, as well as supervise the wheat harvest and cultivate silk cocoons. The system of state control and coercion is so entrenched that farmers plant according to what and when the state dictates instead of taking into account the soil, water, and climate conditions. Extreme weather and drought have impeded farmers’ ability to irrigate their fields properly, placing them at the mercy of a government that neglects to meaningfully address the country’s water shortage. The administrations of the peasant associations enforce the command production system, which, in 2022, included ordering farmers to plant crops before fields were ready, and controlling key inputs — especially water — to maintain compliance.



KEY FINDINGS

Forced labor of public sector employees to pick cotton was widespread and systematic in all regions monitored. Public sector employees were required to pick cotton, hire replacement pickers, or pay money to a supervisor for replacement pickers or other harvest expenses — a “pick or pay” system. Employees were still expected to complete their regular workload, and those present at work had to cover for those sent to the fields.

Child labor was used in the 2022 harvest, driven by poverty and the forced labor system. Some children were paid to work as replacement pickers hired by public sector employees who had to pick or pay; others were sent as replacement pickers by parents or relatives who were forcibly mobilized to pick or pay; and still others joined the harvest to earn money for their families. Children as young as eight were seen picking cotton alongside adults in cotton fields across the country.

Picking assignments could last for days or weeks, and pickers, whether forcibly recruited or not, had to provide their own food, water, and accommodations. At the fields, some workers slept outside, even after temperatures dipped below freezing, to save money on daily transportation costs. Transportation was also dangerous: the assigned fields were often far away, and many suffered hours-long rides in unsafe vehicles on treacherous roads.

Drought, problematic irrigation practices, climate change, and a failure by the government to address environmental concerns led to widespread water shortages, which ultimately lowered crop yields and contributed to long-term environmental damage. Farmers paid the price, in both money and labor, for neglected and unmaintained irrigation systems to meet their state-mandated production quotas.

The Turkmen government has claimed that mechanized harvesting has eliminated the need for hand picking. However, the use of handpicking persists for a myriad of reasons: cotton picked by hand is more valuable; mechanical picking is not appropriate for small plots of land or towards the beginning of the harvest season; and machines are expensive to access, buy, and maintain. Officials mobilize pickers to the fields even when there is little or no cotton to demonstrate their efforts to the harvest. Furthermore, many officials and heads of institutions reap financial benefits through extortion schemes.

Corruption and extortion are endemic to the cotton production system. Money and personal connections determine which farmers receive the best plots of land; essential inputs ostensibly provided for free by the state, such as seeds, fertilizer, and agricultural equipment, are sold off for cash; middlemen take cuts from money designated for replacement pickers; and cotton collection centers routinely cheat farmers of up to 20% of their harvests. No element to the harvest is free of routine financial exploitation.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

All stakeholder groups — including governments, companies, and international institutions — have a key role to play in ending state-imposed forced labor in Turkmenistan and creating a broader enabling environment for labor rights, including freedom of association, collective bargaining, and other civil and political rights such as freedom of expression.

The **government of Turkmenistan** must take urgent action to end the practice of state-sponsored forced labor in the cotton sector. The government must enforce national laws that prohibit the use of forced and child labor; take action to hold officials to account for forcing citizens to work; and fully cooperate with and implement recommendations from UN treaty bodies, Special Procedures, and ILO Supervisory Mechanisms. It must also enable monitors, journalists, and other labor rights defenders to operate freely and without the threat of reprisal.

Foreign governments should increase pressure on the Turkmen government to reform its forced labor system by employing both a human and labor rights framework in accordance with the United Nations (UN) and International Labour Organization (ILO) human rights conventions and standards, and a business and human rights due diligence framework, consistent with national laws governing human rights due diligence, supply chains, and imports, which require global companies to not source products made with forced labor.

In public and diplomatic fora, such as bilateral and multilateral human rights dialogues, governments should raise the issue of forced labor, and support human rights defenders by expressing concerns about the physical, civil, and legal consequences to which they are subjected. Governments should also elevate forced labor issues with international finance institutions to prevent investments that directly or indirectly contribute to Turkmenistan's forced labor cotton production system.

Domestically, governments should introduce and enforce import control measures to prohibit the import of products containing Turkmen cotton. Legislatures should enact mandatory human rights due diligence and transparency laws, which require all forms of business enterprises to conduct human rights due diligence in their supply chains, and map and disclose all tiers of their supply chains.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) should ensure the participation of independent civil society experts in all ILO-led monitoring, and report on all ILO Indicators of Forced Labor, adapted to the unique context of Turkmenistan and the particularities of state-imposed forced labor. This includes meaningful engagement with international unions and labor stakeholders, and regular consultations with the Cotton Campaign and its independent Turkmen civil society partners in the development and implementation of all ILO activities in Turkmenistan.

In its discussions with the Turkmen government, the ILO must make clear that durable solutions to state-imposed forced labor require enabling the exercise of labor rights and civil rights, including freedom of association, assembly, and collective bargaining. It should further establish, monitor, and report on clear benchmarks for the Turkmen government to fulfill its obligations under all fundamental labor conventions of the ILO.

Brands and retailers should sign the Turkmen Cotton Pledge to demonstrate their public commitment to eliminate any Turkmen cotton from their products as long as Turkmen cotton is produced with state-orchestrated forced labor.¹ This includes immediately terminating all direct sourcing relationships with Turkmen suppliers, and mapping supply chains to the raw materials level to ensure their products are free from cotton originating in Turkmenistan.

¹ *The Turkmen Cotton Pledge for Companies*, Cotton Campaign, <https://www.cottoncampaign.org/turkmen-cotton-pledge> [last accessed May 2023].