



Forum: Human Rights Commission

Question of: Combating Human Trafficking and its Role in Forced
Labor Practices Within Uzbekistan's Cotton Industry

Chair

Introduction

Practices of forced labor and human trafficking are considered severe global challenges, especially within major industries that depend on the exploitation of vulnerable populations. The Republic of Uzbekistan is one of the major cotton exporters worldwide, with the practice of forced labor historically being common during the yearly cotton harvest. Despite governmental reforms, exploitative labour continues today, with thousands coerced under threats to work in cotton fields.



Figure 1 – Forced labor during Uzbekistan's annual cotton harvest

Regarding the Uzbekistani cotton industries, human trafficking is manifested as forced labor, in which individuals are made to work without adequate compensation or general consent. Historically, under the authority of the Soviet Union, cotton manufacturing grew to become a foundation of Uzbekistan's economy - with governmentally led labor campaigns and rigid quotas. This cornerstone continued after Uzbekistan gained independence from Soviet rule in 1991, enabled by insufficient monitoring and poor labor laws. This contradicts Goal 8 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aims to “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.”

This question holds major international relevance as Uzbekistan's cotton has been part of global markets for many years, fostering ethical and moral concerns regarding the violation of human rights, consumer accountability, and supply chain transparency. Worldwide organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGO's), and international producers have urged for reform and greater consumer accountability. Tackling the roots causes of labor abuse and trafficking is crucial; not solely for the protection of human rights but also for enabling ethical trade and long-term sustainability.

The question of combating human trafficking and its role in forced labor practices within Uzbekistan's cotton industry directly aligns with the AMMUN XXIV theme of “Deliberate to Liberate”, as addressing forced labor within Uzbekistani industries demands strategic, purposeful action. Delegates are required to explore how international relations, governmental policies, and local empowerment may coalesce to eradicate exploitative labor systems and enable sustained liberation from forced labor and human trafficking.

Definition of Key Terms

Human Trafficking

The transport, recruitment, or harboring of individuals by force, propaganda, or methods of coercion for reasons of exploitation. It is a major violation of human rights, and it may include forced enslavement, sexual exploitation, or forced labor. Regarding the question of human trafficking and its role in forced labor practices within Uzbekistan's cotton industry, human trafficking is present as citizens – typically rural workers, teachers, and students – are forced and threatened into labor during the annual cotton harvest without fair compensation (payment) or consent.

Forced Labor

Any service or work in which individuals involved are forced to work against their will, typically under propaganda, deception, or threat, lacking correct compensation, safe environments, or the ability to freely leave.

Decent Work

Defined by the International Labor Organization (ILO), decent work refers to employment that is paid fairly, provides social protection, ensures a safe workplace, and provides opportunities for individual growth and development. The forced labor environment cotton fields does not coincide with the basic foundation of decent work due to the rejection of fair wages, voluntary employment, and the denying of the workers' basic rights.

International Labor Organization (ILO)

The international Labor Organization (ILO) is a United Nations (UN) agency which promotes individual rights at the workplace and also sets worldwide labor standards; including the abolition of child labor, discrimination in the workplace, and forced labor. The ILO has carefully examined reforms in labor within Uzbekistan and collaborates with governments and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) to eliminate forced labor with policy guidance and technical aid.

Supply Chain Transparency

Refers to the ability of both producers and consumers to trace and understand the labor

conditions and environment in which a certain good is being produced – including its origin. The Republic of Uzbekistan exports and produces large quantities of cotton internationally; the lack of supply chain transparency causes goods that have been produced with forced labor to enter the global market.

Rigid Quotas

Refers to severe, governmentally mandated targets of harvest or production that laborers and farmers are required to reach, typically under fear of punishment.

General Overview

Uzbekistan's cotton industry has long been a major contributor to its economy, but it is also closely linked to forced labor and human trafficking. For decades, the government operated a system where millions of citizens, including students, teachers, and public workers, were compelled to harvest cotton under threat of punishment. This system made Uzbekistan one of the world's most visible examples of state-enforced forced labor, drawing global criticism and widespread boycotts.

The 2022 Global Slavery index estimates that roughly 47,000 people in Uzbekistan still live in conditions resembling modern slavery. Since 2016, the government has introduced key reforms. The international labor organization (ILO) declared in 2022 that systemic forced labor had ended, and most cotton workers now participate voluntarily. This led to the lifting of many international boycotts and renewed trade.

Despite progress, challenges remain. In rural areas, economic hardship and local pressure continue to influence participation. Many workers lack formal contracts and awareness of their rights, exposing them to exploitation. True, lasting change depends on law enforcement, rights education, and creating sustainable alternatives for vulnerable populations.

Causes of the Problem

Forced labour in Uzbekistan's cotton sector stems from entrenched political and historical structures. During the soviet era, Uzbekistan was designated as a primary cotton producer. The government enforced quotas and mobilized labour, often through coercion. After independence in

1991, this system continued, and labour mobilization remained state mandated. Rural populations and public sector workers were regularly forced into fields under threat of punishment.

Lack of strong labour protections allows exploitation to persist. Although reforms have been made, labour inspectors often lack independence and face pressure from local authorities. Victims of forced labour typically lack legal support, and the absence of active, independent unions make it difficult to monitor and prevent abuse.

Poverty and economic instability also play major roles. Many rural families face limited job opportunities and agree to work without understanding poor pay or harsh conditions. Employers and local officials sometimes benefit from these systems, reducing production costs by exploiting labour. Corruption reinforces these practices, as officials may turn a blind eye or even participate for personal gain.

Complex global supply chains make it difficult for consumers to trace the origins of cotton, reducing accountability. This allows cotton harvested through abusive systems to enter international markets unnoticed. Workers also fear reprisals and lack awareness of how to report abuse safely. Without proper protections and enforcement, these patterns continue.

History

The use of forced labor in Uzbekistan's cotton industry dates to the soviet era. As a key cotton supplier to the USSR, Uzbekistan was given strict production quotas. Local authorities were expected to meet these targets regardless of cost, leading to mass mobilization of citizens, including students and civil servants. Much of this labor was unpaid or performed under threat, laying the groundwork for institutionalized forced labor.

After independence in 1991, Uzbekistan retained the soviet-style, quota-based model. The government-controlled land use and production targets, continuing to rely on seasonal forced labor. Workers were often told it was their patriotic duty, and refusal meant job loss or punishment. Teachers, medical staff, and even children were required to work during harvest season.

By the early 2000s, international attention grew. Human rights organizations exposed the use of forced and child labor, prompting backlash. In response, the government banned child labor in 2009 and signed agreements with the international labor organization (ILO) in 2013 to investigate and improve labor standards. While child labor decreased, adult forced labor persisted for several more years due to ongoing pressure to meet state quotas.

International Response

The International community has responded through monitoring, advocacy, and diplomatic pressure. The international Labor Organization (ILO), in partnership with the world bank and the Uzbek government, has played a leading role since 2012. The ILO developed a monitoring framework to assess labour conditions and eliminate forced and child labour. In 2022, it announced that state-imposed labour had been eradicated through local-level exploitation remains a concern.

The United Nations also supported reforms through sustainable development goal 8.7, which calls for the elimination of modern slavery, forced labour, and human trafficking. UN agencies, including UNODC, have helped strengthen Uzbekistan's legal framework, train enforcement officials, and coordinate international efforts to combat human trafficking across Central Asia.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been vital in exposing abuses and promoting change. Groups such as human rights watch, anti-slavery international and the cotton campaign pressured groups such as human rights watch, anti-slavery international, and the cotton campaign pressured global brands to boycott Uzbek cotton until reforms were enacted. The better cotton initiative (BCI) halted operations in Uzbekistan for years before re-engaging with stakeholders to support ethical labour practices. As Uzbekistan seeks greater participation in the global textile market, compliance with international labour standards remains essential for its long-term economic development.

Impacts of the Problem

Forced labor and trafficking in Uzbekistan's cotton industry have led to widespread harm. Workers under coercive conditions often receive little or no compensation and face long hours without adequate nutrition, rest, or healthcare. This results in physical and psychological harm, particularly for women and young workers who face higher risks of abuse.

The education system has also been impacted. Teachers and students forced to participate in the cotton harvest lose valuable classroom time, undermining learning and long-term development. This disrupts educational progress and limits future employment prospects, reinforcing cycles of poverty.

Internationally, the country's reputation suffered. Years of global boycotts and trade restrictions damaged Uzbekistan's economy and limited access to foreign investment. While many bans have now been lifted, the country still faces pressure to maintain transparency and

prevent a return to abusive practices.

The issue also deepens social inequality. Rural and low-income communities are disproportionately affected, widening the gap between rich and poor. Continued exploitation undermines trust in government institutions, fueling dissatisfaction and political instability. Moreover, ignoring labor rights threatens Uzbekistan's progress toward global development goals, delaying economic growth and social reform.

Major Parties Involved

The government of Uzbekistan

The government of Uzbekistan has made significant strides in eradicating systemic forced and child labor in the cotton industry. The government worked to eliminate state-imposed labor practices and promote ethical employment through legal reforms, enforcement of labor standards, and cooperation with international organizations.

Cotton Campaign

The cotton campaign, a global condition of labour, human rights, and business organizations, has advocated for the end of forced labour in Uzbekistan's cotton sector. It successfully led a global boycott of Uzbek cotton, pressuring the government and companies to commit to ethical labour standards.

U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL)

The USDOL funds and supports initiatives aimed at ending forced labor in global supply chains, including in Uzbekistan. It also contributes to reports and blacklists, such as the "List of goods produced by Child Labor or forced Labor," which has historically included Uzbek cotton.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

UNDP works with Uzbekistan to promote human rights, labor reforms, and sustainable economic development. It supports institutional strengthening and community-based programs aimed at preventing human trafficking and improving livelihoods in rural areas.

The Federal Republic of Germany

Germany has provided development aid and technical assistance aimed at improving labor conditions in Uzbekistan. German partnerships with local institutions and international labor organizations have contributed to transparency and reform in the cotton industry.

European Union (EU)

The European Union has supported Uzbekistan's labor reforms through diplomatic engagement, trade agreements contingent on human rights standards, and funding for development programs that target vulnerable labor populations and promote ethical production.

The United States of America (USA)

The United States has played a key role through the U.S. Department of Labor and the Office to monitor and combat trafficking in persons. It has funded anti-trafficking initiatives, issued labor rights reports, and included Uzbek cotton on international watchlists to hold actors accountable for forced labor.

International Labor Organizations (ILO)

The international Labor organization has collaborated closely with the Uzbek government to monitor and report on labor conditions, particularly during the cotton harvest. Through its third-party monitoring project, the ILO has supported efforts to end forced labor and develop sustainable labor practices.

Anti-Slavery International

The Anti-Slavery International group has advocated for the elimination of forced labor and human trafficking practices within the Uzbek cotton industry. It has also supported worldwide campaigns, collaborating closely with global and local partners to pressure the Uzbekistani government to initiate immediate reforms and protect labor rights in the cotton industry.

Timeline of Events

Date	Event
2005/October	Worldwide attention spreads with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) publishing reports revealing the imposed child and forced labor within the cotton industry of Uzbekistan.
2007/November	The Cotton Campaign is formed. The Cotton Campaign is an international group launched to

	pressure the Uzbekistani government and other worldwide companies to cease supporting cotton exports that are farmed by state-imposed forced labor.
2009/September/10 th	United States Department of Labor (USDOL) lists Uzbek cotton to the <i>List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor</i> – raising awareness and pressure for reform.
2011/December/15 th	The European Parliament adopted a resolution that links privileges in trade with the improvement of international human rights, prompting a demand for the eradication of child and forced labor within Uzbek industries.
2012/September/10 th	Due to international pressure focused on Uzbekistan, the ILO was permitted by the Uzbek government to initiate monitoring protocols and examine labor conditions during the annual cotton harvest in major Uzbek cotton industries.
2017/December/29 th	The current Uzbek President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, signs a resolution effectively ceasing any forced labor/mobilization of individuals during the cotton harvests against their will - initiating reforms to encourage human rights.
2018/December	The ILO, supported by the World Bank (WB), reports a clear decline in child labor as well as forms of forced adult labor within Uzbek cotton industry harvests.
2020/January	Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) reports as well as official statements declare that systemically

	forced child labor in Uzbek cotton industries has been fully eradicated. However, forced adult labor persists in areas.
2021/March/9 th	The Uzbek Forum for Human Rights and the ILO report immediate drops in state-imposed labor and increasing public opposition to threats and coercion. Workers begin recording forced labor without fear of punishment.
2022/March/10 th	After nearly 15 years of boycotting Uzbek cotton exports, the Cotton Campaign lifts the boycott.
2023/June	The Republic of Uzbekistan collaborates with the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) and initiates trial projects in sourcing trackable, ethically produced cotton focused on international markets.

Attempts to Solve the Issue

Decent work country program for Uzbekistan, 2017/01/01- present (ILO partnership initiative)

This program, led by the international Labor Organization (ILO), worked with Uzbekistan to end forced and child labor in the cotton industry. It used field monitoring and worker interviews to track progress. In 2022, the ILO confirmed that forced labor was no longer a systemic issue. While pressure on workers still happens in some areas, this program has led to major improvements.

Universal periodic review (UPR) recommendations to Uzbekistan, 2013 & 2018 (UN Human Rights council review)

In these reviews, many countries told Uzbekistan to stop using forced labor in cotton harvesting. The country accepted most recommendations and started reforms. Although, the reviews are not legally binding, they helped raise pressure and attention, leading to change.

Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development, 2015/09/25 (A/RES/70/1)

This UN resolution includes goal 8.7, which urges countries to end forced labor and human trafficking. Uzbekistan agreed to follow the agenda and used it to support labor reforms. Though broad, it supports long-term efforts to stop exploitation in cotton and other industries.

Possible Solutions

Promoting local awareness initiatives and education campaigns on labor rights and human trafficking within at-risk communities

Informational outreach campaigns aimed at at-risk and rural Uzbekistani regions and populations may educate workers about their labor rights and how to correctly identify and resist practices of coercion into forced labor. Media initiatives such as utilizing accessible and local modes of communication including posters, radio, or community centers, can magnify stories of forced labour and human trafficking survivors to advise against varying tactics of recruitment. Collaborating with civic centers, educational programs, and local leaders fosters a strong base for group resistance and worker rights. Connecting with worldwide groups including the ILO, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) can work with local non-governmental organizations to provide informational/educational materials, training modules, or access to a hotline in empowering susceptible individuals and populations.

Encourages rigorous worldwide surveillance of the Uzbek government's implementation of ethical and fair labor standards within the Uzbekistani cotton industry

Routine evaluations from an independent point of view in collaboration with international organizations, including relevant UN agencies and the International Labor Organization (ILO), can aid in ensuring that present reforms and regulations are correctly applied and sustained. Reinforcing independent oversight via transparent reports, immediate engagement with local workers and communities, and a communal disclosure of report findings may further strengthen the accountability of the Uzbekistani government. Moreover, endorsing relationships with non-

governmental organizations (NGOs) and relevant trade partners may further aid the Uzbek government in upholding compliance with international employment standards and in tackling any residual practices of coercion or forced labor.

Guiding Questions

1. What are the main causes of forced labor and human trafficking within the Uzbek cotton industry?
2. How did politics play a role in shaping the use of forced labor during the annual Uzbek cotton harvest?
3. Did governmental policies and law structures have a role in enabling forced labor practices within Uzbek cotton industries?
4. How were rural communities and populations affected by practices of human trafficking and forced labor in the Uzbek cotton industry.
5. Which particular groups of people were subjected most to forced labour and coercion within the Uzbek cotton industry and why?
6. What changes in policy or reforms has the Uzbekistani government made to combat this issue, were they successful?
7. How have advocacy groups and NGOs (e.g. Cotton Campaign) altered the international awareness of the issue, did it lead to any reforms?
8. What methods remain in protecting individuals subjected to forced labour or coercion in Uzbekistan?
9. How does a lack of supply chain transparency contribute to the continuance of practices of forced labor in Uzbek cotton sectors?
10. How does public awareness or quality of education in Uzbekistan play a role in combating practices of forced labour and human trafficking?

Appendix

- <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/uzbek-cotton-free-systemic-child-labour-and-forced-labour>
- https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2023/Uzbekistan.pdf

- <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2025/05/27/weaving-a-new-future-in-uzbekistan-s-cotton-sector>
- <https://bettercotton.org/better-cotton-signs-roadmap-to-future-proof-uzbekistan-programme/>
- <https://www.cottoncampaign.org/uzbekistan>
- <https://www.uzbekforum.org/uzbek-cotton-harvest-2023-risk-of-forced-labor-remains-high/>
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