

This statement is delivered on behalf of the Cotton Campaign, a multi-stakeholder coalition leading human rights advocacy to end forced labor and promote decent work in Central Asia. I will be speaking today about state-imposed forced labor and child labor in the cotton sector in Turkmenistan, and the persecution of activists and human rights defenders who seek to document it.

All information is based on direct evidence of forced mobilization of cotton pickers during the annual cotton harvest. This evidence is collected annually by a network of independent monitors working with and trained by Cotton Campaign member organizations Turkmen News and the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights. Conducting their work in secret, independent monitors and informants do so at great personal risk.

No Cotton Campaign members were invited to join any national consultations organised by the Government of Turkmenistan; to our knowledge, none have taken place. There is nothing resembling independent civil society in Turkmenistan due to extreme limitations on fundamental human rights.

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During the 3rd cycle, Turkmenistan received four recommendations relating to forced labor. Of these, the Government merely noted a recommendation from Chile, and despite supporting three others, findings by independent labor monitors in Turkmenistan clearly demonstrate that there has been **no progress in reducing forced labor in the cotton sector since Turkmenistan's last review in 2018**.

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This was also found by the ILO Committee on the Application of Standards in June 2023, which deplored the Government's failure to make any meaningful progress on the matter since the Committee discussed the case in 2016 and 2021.

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Forced labor

Each year during the cotton harvest in Turkmenistan, the government forces tens of thousands of public and private sector workers to pick cotton in hazardous and unsanitary conditions, or pay a bribe or pay for someone to replace them. These demands come under threat of penalty, including intimidation, lost wages and termination of employment, to ensure compliance. The Turkmen Government maintains total control over cotton production and forces farmers to meet official production quotas under threat of penalty, including loss of land.

Independent monitoring conducted during the 2022 cotton season found that forced labor of public sector employees continued to be widespread and systematic.

We welcome that the Government has recently begun engaging with the ILO on a programme of cooperation for implementing the ILO Convention on the Abolition of

Forced Labour. Yet at the same time, the Government continues to publicly deny the use of forced labor in the harvest—most recently this year during its reviews by the ILO Committee on the Application of Standards and UN Human Rights Committee – and to harass and attack anyone who speaks out about human and labor rights abuses.

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Child labor

Child labor has also been documented during every cotton harvest since the Government's last review, despite an official prohibition. This is driven by both poverty and the forced labor system – some children are paid to work as replacement pickers hired by public sector employees; others are sent as replacement pickers by relatives who were forcibly mobilized; others join the harvest to earn money for their families. In 2022, children as young as eight were seen picking cotton alongside adults across the country.

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Repression of civic freedoms

The Government takes extensive measures to prevent such documentation, including surveillance of meeting and pick-up locations, and restrictions on taking photos and other forms of evidence gathering. Meanwhile, the Government continues to severely repress all civic freedoms, which are crucial to combating forced labor. All civil society organizations that are publicly critical of the Government's repressive regime, including Turkmen News and the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, must work from exile.

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Recommendations

Forced labor was underrepresented as an area of concern during Turkmenistan's last UPR, with only four recommendations on this issue. We urge States to consider making the following recommendations to the Government of Turkmenistan.

- Develop a time-bound plan to reform the root causes of forced labor in the cotton sector, in consultation with independent worker and employer organizations, civil society, and the ILO.
- Instruct government representatives at all levels on the prohibition of forced labor and strengthen law enforcement – including by prosecuting or sanctioning appropriately officials found to be mobilizing forced labor.
- Allow independent monitors, journalists, and human rights defenders to document and report labor conditions without fear of reprisal.

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- Enforce national laws that prohibit the use of forced and child labor, in alignment with ratified ILO Conventions.
- Acknowledge that forced labor exists in Turkmenistan and make public, high-level policy statements condemning it, specifically including forced labor in the cotton sector, making clear that all work should be voluntary and fairly compensated.
- Fully cooperate with UN agencies and human rights bodies, including by facilitating all visit requests by Human Rights Council special procedure mandate holders and allowing unhindered access to the country to the ILO.

1 minute concluding remark:

Long-lasting solutions to ending forced labor in Turkmenistan must be grounded in a rights-based approach for the workers and farmers in that system - and require the broader enabling of rights, including freedom of association, expression, and assembly.

As it stands, tens of thousands of people will once again be forced to work in the fields this cotton season, beginning as we speak, picking cotton under threat of punishment, under Government orders.

The 2022 independent monitoring findings show that the Government has not taken meaningful steps to eradicate this practice since the last review. Change is long-overdue.

We urge the Government to take urgent action to end the practice of state-sponsored forced labor in the cotton sector, and we call on Permanent Missions to prioritise this issue within their recommendations to Turkmenistan this year.