

It's time to lift the BOYCOTT of Uzbek cotton, garments and textiles

Uzbek human rights activists have been participating in ILO's Third-Party Monitoring Project against child and forced labour in Uzbekistan. Compared to previous years, human rights activists were free to monitor the 2018 cotton harvest without any pressure or duress.

Meetings are organized regularly to allow for human rights activists to report on their findings and observations. There are different opinions, but everybody agrees that forced labour still exists in Uzbekistan. However, the new government continues to make genuine efforts to completely eliminate forced labour. The Government has implemented a number of comprehensive measures and punished hundreds of perpetrators of forced labour in 2018. This is an ongoing process and it will take time before we can say that forced labour is completely eradicated at the local level. However, the reforms and practical steps of the government to fight forced labour deserve positive recognition and support from all stakeholders.

We – independent civil society activists of Uzbekistan – note that systemic forced labour in the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan has ended. Uzbekistan has overcome a period of difficulties associated with the elimination of forced labour. A large-scale reform of the cotton sector has begun. The United States recently upgraded Uzbekistan on the Trafficking in Persons Report and removed Uzbek Cotton from the List of Products Requiring Federal Contractor Certification. These are welcome steps that recognize the achievements of Uzbekistan. Uzbek cotton, textiles and garments, however, remain on the black list of the Cotton Campaign with 313 multinational brands and retailers continuing to BOYCOTT any form of investment and trade with Uzbekistan related to cotton, textiles and garments.

Despite the positive impact of the reform process, Uzbekistan still has a significant unemployment problem. Many people struggle to find a formal job and a very considerable part of the country's young population is currently unemployed. We firmly believe that the time has come to completely lift the BOYCOTT of Uzbek cotton, textiles and garments. We need foreign investment and trade to help solve the problem of unemployment and to improve the livelihoods of ordinary people.

It must be recognized that the BOYCOTT of Uzbek cotton was justified and helpful during the dictatorship of I. Karimov. However, given the real changes in the governance of the country over the last three years, we consider it timely and appropriate both from a political and social perspective to lift the BOYCOTT of Uzbek cotton. Uzbekistan needs all the help and assistance it can get from responsible investors and buyers to strengthen the economy and create decent jobs by increasing domestic manufacturing and export of finished products rather than raw cotton.

We conclude that the BOYCOTT of Uzbek cotton, textiles and garments should be lifted in recognition of the efforts and results of the Government to eradicate forced labour and to provide the Government with an opportunity to improve the living conditions of the country's population and thereby build public confidence in the reform process.

The BOYCOTT doesn't serve the interests of ordinary Uzbeks. If the BOYCOTT continues, high-level officials of the Uzbek government will not suffer but continue to enjoy permanent jobs and good living conditions, as they have always had. The negative consequences of the BOYCOTT will instead impact ordinary and especially UNEMPLOYED people in our country. Maintaining the BOYCOTT will also limit the positive impacts of the reform process and thereby indirectly support the interests of more conservative forces. The BOYCOTT also impedes the consolidation of civil society and distracts attention from other important matters where progress could be made.

Based on these conclusions, the human rights activists of Uzbekistan vote in favour of lifting the BOYCOTT and we urge responsible investors and businesses to help our country develop decent jobs and improve the livelihood of ordinary Uzbeks.

- Tolib Yakubov, Head of the Uzbek Society for Human Rights, Tashkent
- Azamjon Formonov, former political prisoner, member of the initiative group *“Striving for Justice”*, Jizak
- *Abdurahmon Tashanov, “Ezgulik” Human Rights Society, Tashkent*
- Zohidjon Zokirov, human rights activist, member of the Public Monitors Group on Eradication of Forced Labour, Namangan
- Ruhiddin Komilov, lawyer, member of Mediation Group, human rights defender, Tashkent
- Shukhrat Ganiyev, Head of the *“Humanitarian-Legal Centre”* public organization, leader of the Mediation Group, Bukhara
- Dilmurod Sayid, former political prisoner, member of the initiative group *“Striving for Justice”*, Tashkent
- Botirbek Adizov, Humanitarian Law Centre, member of the Public Monitors Group on Eradication of Forced Labour, Bukhara
- Arslanbay Utepov, head of the NGO *“Keleshek”*, member of the Mediation Group, member of the Public Monitors Group on Eradication of Forced Labour, Republic of Karakalpakstan
- Khaitboy Yakubov, head of the organization for the protection of human rights *“Najot”*, member of the Public Monitors Group on Eradication of Forced Labour, Khorezm region