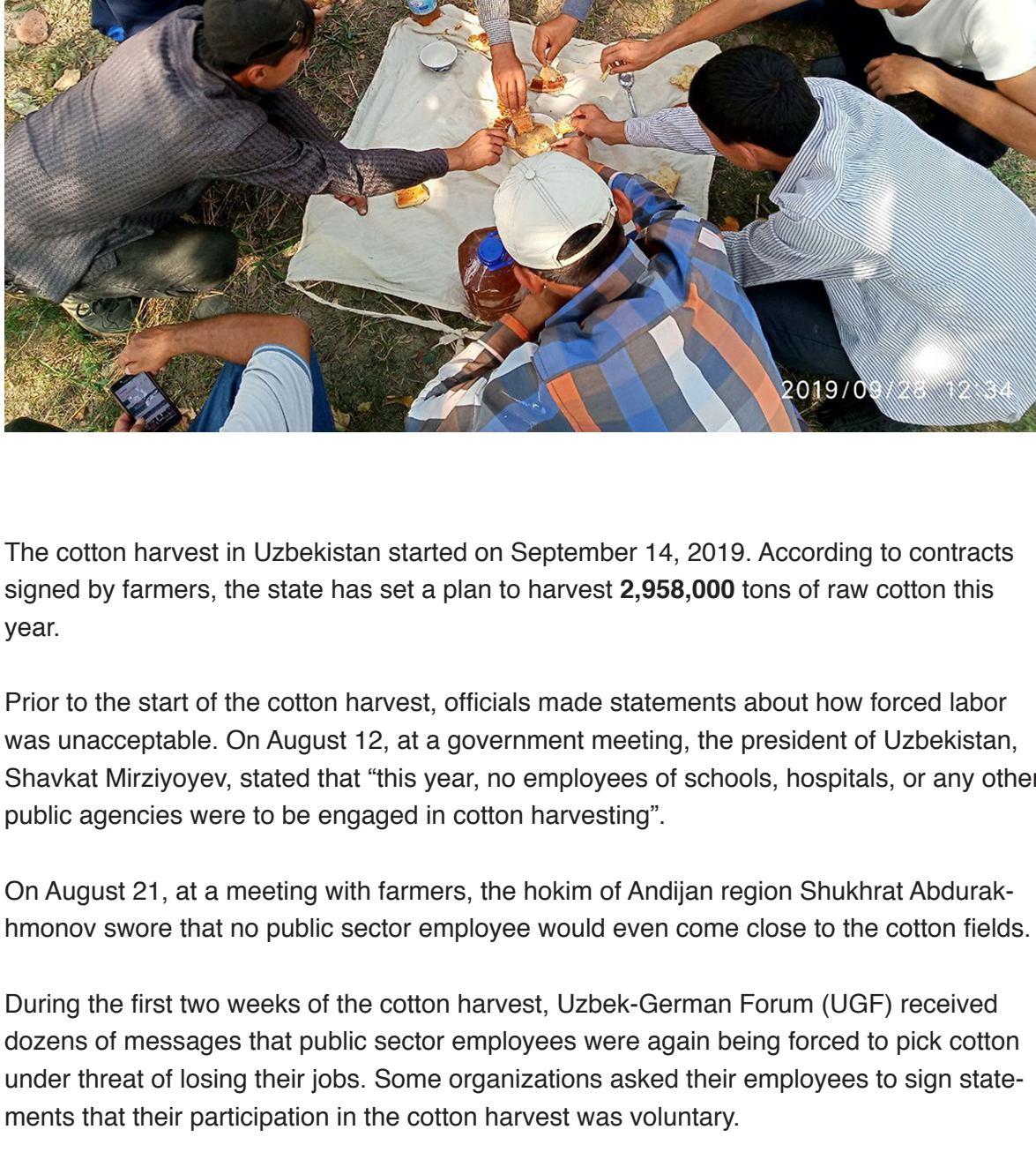


Uzbekistan Cotton Harvest 2019 Chronicle of Forced Labor

September 14 – 30, 2019



The cotton harvest in Uzbekistan started on September 14, 2019. According to contracts signed by farmers, the state has set a plan to harvest **2,958,000** tons of raw cotton this year.

Prior to the start of the cotton harvest, officials made statements about how forced labor was unacceptable. On August 12, at a government meeting, the president of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, stated that "this year, no employees of schools, hospitals, or any other public agencies were to be engaged in cotton harvesting".

On August 21, at a meeting with farmers, the hokim of Andijan region Shukhrat Abdurakhmonov swore that no public sector employee would even come close to the cotton fields.

During the first two weeks of the cotton harvest, Uzbek-German Forum (UGF) received dozens of messages that public sector employees were again being forced to pick cotton under threat of losing their jobs. Some organizations asked their employees to sign statements that their participation in the cotton harvest was voluntary.

Heads of mahallas and women's committee employees are mainly responsible for recruiting cotton pickers and organizing groups of cotton pickers among unemployed women.

The heads of regions (hokims) responsible for fulfilling cotton quotas began holding meetings on the cotton picking process which begin at 10pm. According to a fax, which is signed by the deputy hokim of the Khorezm region Uktamboi Kurbanov, and which was sent to all district leaders of the Khorezm region, the heads of all districts and their deputies, heads of tax departments, heads of cotton brigades, chairmen of mahallas, chairmen of machine and tractor parks, heads of farmers' councils, heads of employment departments, technical control inspectors, heads of land resources departments and heads of regional commercial banks must be present at night meetings.



Radio Ozodlik's wide network of sources across the country have reported on a number of cases of forced labor during the cotton harvest. On September 16, Ozodlik received a letter from residents of the Khanabad district of the Andijan region, which said that every mahalla had to engage 150 "volunteers" in cotton harvesting. The list of "volunteers" attached to the letter showed the names of various public sector employees.

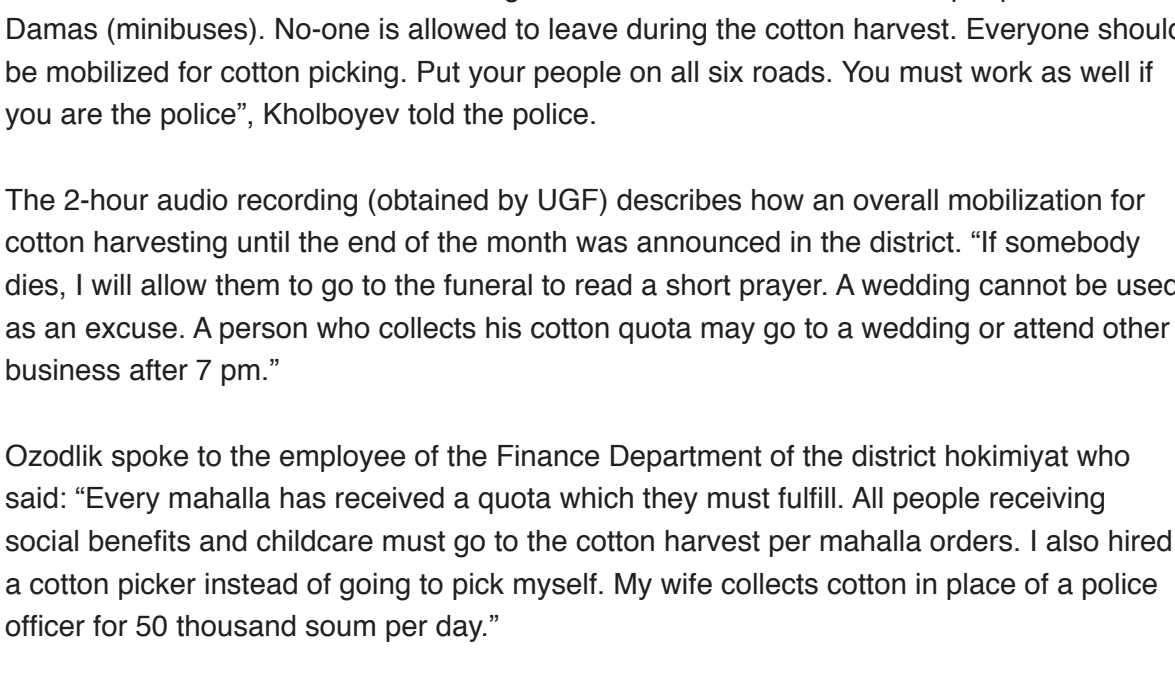
Employees from an electricity company in Andijan city told Ozodlik that they had been forced to pick cotton or give money for replacement pickers. They sent to Ozodlik a copy of a letter written on September 6 by the head of the electricity company which stated: "Dear colleagues, today when you come to work, write a statement on your voluntary participation in the cotton harvest".

"We were told that we either had to pick cotton or pay between 500 and 1 million soum. Our monthly salary is 1 million soum (\$105). Whom should we complain to?", the letter asked.

Employees from the company Fargonaazot in Fergana city were forced to pick cotton in the Jizzakh region. A letter published by Ozodlik on September 14 says, "We are told that if we don't go to the cotton harvest we should quit. They (the factory management – Ed.) eat well but we have to go to Jizzakh, live in a cattle shed and eat prison food."

A letter from bank employees in the Namangan region who were tasked with hiring cotton pickers to replace them states, "I write to you from Namangan on behalf of employees of the People's Bank. The cotton harvest has begun. One group (of employees – Ed.) has left to pick cotton. The rest of the employees have to give 50 thousand soum per day".

A monitor from UGF in Karakalpakstan interviewed employees of four banks located in the Elikala district in the Karakalpakstan region and found that banks are hiring cotton pickers to form groups of pickers. When asked who was responsible for hiring the pickers, the monitor was told that an accountant from the People's Bank and a bank manager from the Mikroreditbank were in charge.



Cadets of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Academy in Tashkent were sent to pick cotton in the Jizzakh region. According to a cadet who sent a copy of his "voluntary statement" to Radio Ozodlik, they were told what to write in the statement:

"I am obliged to diligently perform all my duties during the cotton harvest in 2019. I am aware that it is restricted to leave the field and cotton station without the supervisor's permission and not to contact local residents. I agree to any punishment for violating the established procedure. I am obliged to follow road traffic rules."

According to Order 492 from September 27 signed by the Acting Minister of Emergency Situations, Lieutenant General Khudaibergenov Tursinkhan, 2,100 employees of the regional emergency departments and fire services were sent to pick cotton in the Jizzakh region. (The full text of the order is obtained by UGF).

Khorezm region, Bagat district: Overall forced mobilization for cotton harvesting

Starting from September 15, employees of all organizations in the Bagat district were sent to pick cotton on the hokim's order. All district organizations apart from schools and three large enterprises were ordered to provide lists of cotton pickers. Feruzbek Matyokubov, a resident of the Bagat district and head of one of the groups, shared information with Ozodlik.

According to Matyokubov, on September 19, the district hokim, Oybek Kholboyev, held a meeting with around 300 managers of farms and public agencies located in the district. One of the farmers sent an audio recording of the meeting to Radio Ozodlik.

The audio recording reveals Oybek Kholboyev admonishing and insulting heads of organizations, in particular, the Finance Department for an insufficient number of employees mobilized to pick cotton: "Get the hell out of here, I cannot see your damn face... I need a finance specialist who picks cotton. You are done, I will get rid of you..."

In the audio recording Kholboyev is also heard admonishing the head of the company "Vatanparvar" (Patriot) which sent only 65 pickers instead of 150.

The hokim ordered police officers, who also attended the meeting, not to let people out of the district. "There are six roads leading out of our district. I was told that people leave on Damas (minibuses). No one is allowed to leave during the cotton harvest. Everyone should be mobilized for cotton picking. Put your people on all six roads. Must work as well if you are the police", Kholboyev told the police.

The 2-hour audio recording (obtained by UGF) describes how an overall mobilization for cotton harvesting until the end of the month was announced in the district. "If somebody dies, I will allow them to go to the funeral to read a short prayer. A wedding cannot be used as an excuse. A person who collects his cotton quota may go to a wedding or attend other business after 7 pm."

Ozodlik spoke to the employee of the Finance Department of the district hokimiyat who said: "Every mahalla has received a quota which they must fulfill. All people receiving social benefits and childcare must go to the cotton harvest per mahalla order. I also hired a cotton picker instead of going to pick myself. My wife collects cotton in place of a police officer for 50 thousand soum per day."

The Ministry of Labor of Uzbekistan has responded to Ozodlik's article on forced labor in Bagat district. According to a statement released by the ministry, labor inspectors visited Bagat district and found that the district's hokim had "violated labor laws." As a result, Oybek Kholboyev, the hokim of Bagat district, Ruzmetov, the head of the financial department, and Avezov, the head of the district department of improvements, were fined between 235 and 700 US dollars.

However, UGF has received reports that the coercion of employees of state organizations in Bagat district has not stopped. "Everything is the same; forced labor continues in Bagat. If you do not believe it, go to the district department of hygiene and epidemiology. You will not find a single employee. Everyone left for the cotton fields with overnight stays", a resident of Bagat district wrote to UGF on October 2.

Andijan region, Asaka district: Farmers forced to hire cotton pickers at their own expense

Ozodlik has published a letter sent by farmers from the Asaka district of the Andijan region. In the letter, farmers complain that local authorities make farmers pay for various public events in the district and threaten them with confiscation of their land if they refuse. "There is another serious issue. No cotton is being grown in the Asaka district. However, every farmer must send two cotton pickers to Boz district at their own expense. One cotton picker costs us at least 50 thousand soum (\$6) per day," the letter says.

Employees of the Main Department of Economy of the Syrdarya region wrote a letter to Ozodlik complaining that they have to either give 2 million soum or go to pick cotton. "Cotton harvesting has begun again. At a meeting, the head of our department said that every employee had to hire two persons each for cotton picking or give 2 million soum each. Those who violate this requirement should start looking for a new job. After such a threat, on September 5, everyone gave 1 million soum each (\$105). We were told to give the rest of the money after receiving an advance for the next month. Our monthly salary is 1,700-1,800 million soum (\$180-190). We are deprived of more than half of it for cotton. How should we support our children?"

Bukhara region: A third of firefighters in the Bukhara region are forcibly sent to pick cotton

Every year the government sends fire service employees to the cotton harvest. It is worth noting that in autumn of 2018, UGF documented numerous cases of forced mobilization of firemen to the cotton harvest in the Jizzakh region.

Firefighters in the Bukhara region told Ozodlik that one of the three shifts of personnel would be sent to pick cotton in the Jizzakh and Syrdarya regions.

"More than 150 firefighters from eleven fire departments will be sent from Monday (September 30) to the Jizzakh and Syrdarya regions. We will be there until the cotton season ends," a firefighter told Ozodlik.

At this time, firefighters have brought mattresses to sleep on to the building of the hokimiyat of the Bukhara region.

"We work in three shifts, and if one shift leaves for cotton, then the load increases for the other two shifts. This means that after 24 hours of work, you need to return to work again. We are not paid for an additional shift." Our boss demands that we don't take work clothes with us to the cotton fields and we should tell everyone who asks that we are locals who are picking cotton voluntarily. This year we were pleased when they began to say everywhere that no one would be forced to pick cotton. Now we know that these words were false. Every year it is the same situation. Nothing has changed", said a fireman in conversation with Ozodlik.

Tashkent region: Employees of the "Suvokov" enterprise hand over 500 thousand soum per cotton

120 employees of the state-owned water supply company in the Tashkent region hand over 500 thousand soum (\$55) for cotton picking. According to an employee, the money is collected by the head of the trade union of the enterprise as ordered by the director. "In addition, we were told to go out to pick cotton at the weekend. We are tired of lawlessness", wrote an employee of the enterprise, attaching a payroll to the letter which lists the names and signatures of employees on their receipt of advance payments to the amount of 500 thousand soum each. The employee said that employees signed a statement on the advance payment although the money was withdrawn for "picking cotton."

Police officers across the country sent to pick cotton

According to information received from UGF monitors, police officers across the country have been sent to pick cotton primarily in the Jizzakh and Syrdarya regions. On September 30, Ozodlik posted a video in which police officers expressed their dissatisfaction at being forced to travel to other areas and living away from their families to pick cotton for two months. People in police uniforms (whose faces are hidden) are wondering whether the ban on forced labor also applies to them. In the video a police officer announces that they need to pick cotton because of the "state of emergency", to which one of the officers objects: "There is a difference between the current situation and the state of emergency, chief."

According to a UGF monitor in the Fergana region, there was an order at the beginning of September from the head of the regional department of internal affairs requiring city and district police departments to send 20 cotton pickers from among police personnel every day or hire pickers in their place. As a source in the Fergana region's internal affairs department told our monitor, police officers whose salaries are not very high, have to extort money from local traders in order to pay for the work of hired cotton pickers which is 50 thousand soum (\$6) per day.

The following are some of the messages sent from Uzbekistan to UGF and Ozodlik's social network:

Kashkadarya region, Guzar district:

Future employees of the Oltin yo'l GTL synthetic fuel plant who are doing internships at the Shurtan gas chemical complex, were sent to pick cotton in the Jizzakh region instead of going to their place of work.

Karakalpakstan, Turtkul district:

Pension fund employees are being forcibly sent to pick cotton. Those who do not pick cotton have to pay between 20 and 40 thousand soum a day for replacement pickers.

Namangan region, Chust district:

Oil depot workers are being forcibly sent to pick cotton. In addition, they say that 200 thousand soum for cotton picking was deducted from their monthly salary of 900 thousand soum.

Navoi and Surkhondarya regions:

From September 25, employees of veterinary services of districts and cities have sent five people to the Jizzakh region to pick cotton by order of the regional department of veterinary services.

Surkhondarya region, Muzrabat district:

Employees of the tax department are forcing private entrepreneurs to pick cotton or donate 35,000 soum (\$ 4) per day.

Surkhondarya region, Baysun district:

The prosecutor of Baysun district, Kholmat Kuliyev, is demanding that the heads of district organizations send employees to pick cotton. A video of Kuliyev using obscene language towards people gathered in front of him was made available to UGF.

Tashkent region, Buka district and the city of Angren:

At a meeting of the administration, the hokim of the Tashkent region, Rustam Kholmatov, demanded that the chairmen of the mahallas and district prosecutors provide one cotton picker from each household. Those who refused to participate were threatened with having their electricity and gas cut off, and those who were involved in picking cotton were ordered to each donate a gas bottle, according to a resident of the city of Angren who took part in the meeting.

UGF will continue to conduct independent monitoring on forced labor throughout the 2019 cotton harvest.