



Turkmenistan Cotton:

State-Imposed Forced Labor in the Annual Cotton Harvest, High Risk in Global Supply Chains

Findings of Independent Civil Society Monitoring of the 2025 Cotton Harvest



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Turkmen.News (TN) is an independent media and human rights organization based in the Netherlands. In addition to its investigative reporting work, since 2013, TN has developed a local network of independent monitors in Turkmenistan who monitor forced labor in the annual cotton harvest. The monitors generally live in the areas they monitor, and are often state employees and in forced labor themselves—which gives them unique access to a range of sources, including local officials, farmers, and pickers.



Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) is an independent civil society organization based in Austria. TIHR works with Turkmen journalists and rights activists who report on a broad range of human rights violations in Turkmenistan. TIHR has developed a local network of independent monitors, who report on the impacts of the forced labor system on cotton farmers and agricultural communities. TIHR also maintains the website [Chronicles of Turkmenistan](#) which provides first hand reporting of the economic situation of Turkmenistan.



Progres Foundation is a non-profit organization based in the United States that supports progressive initiatives contributing to understanding social realities and shaping a new vision and approaches to sustainable human development in Turkmenistan. Progres Foundation operates two platforms: [Saglyk.org](#), which works to improve public health literacy in Turkmenistan, and [Progres.online](#), which is an online analytical journal that promotes a nuanced understanding of the societal trends in Turkmenistan by providing quality research and policy analysis.



The **Cotton Campaign** is a global coalition working to end forced labor and promote decent work in cotton supply chains in Central Asia. Through the Cotton Campaign, Turkmen.News, the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, and Progres Foundation have joined forces with international human and labor rights organizations, trade unions, responsible investors and brand associations, and academics to increase the economic and political pressure on the Turkmen government to end forced labor and exploitation in the cotton sector.

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Table of Contents

1	Executive Summary	4
2	Methodology	9
3	State-imposed Forced Labor in the 2025 Cotton Harvest	10
	Forced Labor: A Top-Down System of Control	10
	Forced Labor in the 2025 Cotton Harvest	12
	Case Study: Forced Labor in the Education Sector	14
	The Role of Trade Unions in the Forced Labor System	17
	Case study: Forced Labor in the Healthcare Sector	18
	Disproportionate Impact on Women	19
	Working and Living Conditions for Cotton Pickers	20
	Case study: Forced Labor of Military Conscripts	21
	Child Labor	22
4	Coercion and Exploitation of Farmers	23
	Limited Access to Essential Inputs and Machinery for Cotton Cultivation	25
	Unequal Access to Irrigation Water	25
	Fertiliser Shortages and Unequal Distribution	25
	Challenges Accessing Agricultural Machinery and Agrotechnology	27
	Farmers' Precarious Financial Situation	28
5	Corruption and Opportunities for Enrichment	31
	Corruption: An Enabling Factor of the Forced Labor System	34
	Falsification of Harvest Data	35
6	Forced Labor Turkmen Cotton in Global Supply Chains	36
7	Recommendations	45
	Annex: Glossary of Terms	48
	Endnotes	49

Executive Summary

Turkmenistan is one of the most repressive countries in the world.¹ It exerts control over all aspects of public life and severely represses all civic freedoms. Turkmenistan is also a cotton producer, with its sector ranking 14th in the global production of cotton.² All cotton originating in Turkmenistan is produced within a state-imposed forced labor system. The government uses widespread and systematic state-imposed forced labor in the annual cotton harvest. Every year between August–December, public authorities force state employees to pick cotton or pay for replacement pickers under threat of penalty, including loss of employment or reduction of work hours or pay.

This report presents the findings of independent civil society monitoring of the 2025 cotton harvest by the Cotton Campaign’s frontline partners Turkmen.News and the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights. These are independent civil society organizations each working with a local network of independent monitors in Turkmenistan to monitor forced labor in the annual cotton harvest and the impacts of the forced labor system on cotton farmers and agricultural communities.

The report also highlights the main routes through which Turkmen cotton enters global markets, serving as a resource to all policy makers, authorities enforcing import ban legislation, investors, brands, and multi-stakeholder initiatives taking steps to eliminate goods made with forced labor from global supply chains.



The Turkmen government uses widespread and systematic state-imposed forced labor in the annual cotton harvest. Women are disproportionately impacted, as they account for the majority of public sector workers. © Turkmen.News

In the 2025 cotton harvest, the government of Turkmenistan forced all groups of state employees—including teachers and technical staff of schools, doctors and nurses, and employees of utilities organizations and cultural centers—to pick cotton or pay for replacement pickers. The government reversed the preliminary steps it had taken in the 2023 and 2024 harvests to begin reducing the scale of forced labor in the cotton harvest,³ which followed the signing of a Roadmap for Cooperation between the government and the International Labour Organization (ILO).⁴ While in the 2024 harvest, doctors in regional hospitals and teachers in some schools were not subjected to forced labor, in the 2025 harvest, public authorities made no

exception and mobilized or extorted all categories of state employees. This is a significant sign of regression and raises the question of whether the Turkmen government has the political will necessary to eradicate forced labor.

The Turkmen government maintains complete control over the cotton production system: it owns the land and leases it to farmers, establishes an annual production quota, sets the price at which it will purchase cotton from farmers, and determines the prices for machinery and inputs. Cotton production quotas are enforced on farmers under the threat of penalty, including fines, destruction of private vegetable crops, and loss of land. Farmers reported that the cost of production is often higher than the price they are paid for the cotton they grow, with many farmers ending up in debt at the end of the harvest. Any unpaid debt is carried over to the next year, creating a vicious circle of exploitation. Anecdotal evidence, collected through interviews conducted during and after the 2025 cotton harvest, indicates an increase in the number of farmers who returned their land to the state and sought primarily agricultural work abroad, in Uzbekistan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, or Türkiye. This was a direct result of being unable to maintain their livelihoods growing cotton in Turkmenistan.

Key Findings

In all regions monitored, public authorities mobilized public sector employees—including teachers, doctors, technical staff, cultural employees and workers at utility organizations—to pick cotton or extorted them to pay for replacement cotton pickers.

Public sector employees who were mobilized to the fields were assigned, on average, a daily picking quota between 45–50 kilograms of cotton. The employees interviewed told monitors that these quotas are impossible to meet given that picking is labor intensive and the temperatures in the fields can reach 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit). Those who failed to meet their quotas were castigated and threatened with loss of wages or employment.

Public sector employees who were extorted to pay for replacement pickers and harvest expenses were required to pay on average between 20–50 manats (\$1–\$2,5) per day. The amounts and the frequency with which employees had to pay varied across regions and state institutions and were determined by the employees’ position and income.

In some regions, private merchants and shop owners were also extorted money to pay for replacement cotton pickers.

The state-imposed forced labor system in Turkmenistan has a disproportionate impact on women, who account for the majority of public sector workers and are heavily represented in the workforces of schools, kindergartens, and hospitals.

Child labor was used in the harvest, despite the fact that the state no longer mobilizes children and that in 2024, the government classified cotton picking as hazardous work and prohibited for children under 18. Children picked cotton alongside family members to help them meet the assigned quotas or were hired as (replacement) pickers.

The government of Turkmenistan severely represses all civic freedoms and monitoring and reporting on forced labor in the cotton harvest remains very risky. In one case from the 2025 harvest, a citizen who was filming state employees weeding in the cotton fields was arrested and interrogated for several hours by an officer of the Ministry of National Security. He was released only after his phone had been inspected and the video deleted.

Coercion and exploitation of farmers continued in 2025, with farmers lacking the ability to challenge the conditions under which they grow and sell cotton. Farmers reported that the cost of production is higher than the price they are paid by the state for the cotton they grow, with many farmers ending up in debt at the end of the harvest.

The Turkmen government did not make any public statements prohibiting forced labor. There are no complaint mechanisms available to workers or farmers. No government officials who used forced labor were held accountable.

Trade unions do not protect workers from forced labor. On the contrary, they are often involved in the forced labor system by organizing the collection of money from state employees to hire replacement pickers to be sent to the fields. The National Center of Trade Unions (NCTU), which is state-controlled, dominates all trade union activity in Turkmenistan.

Corruption remains embedded in, and is a driver of, the forced labor system. The use of forced labor provides public authorities, heads of state institutions, and state-owned cotton collection centers and cotton gins, among other actors, with opportunities to extort money from employees, farmers, or institutions, and embezzle money from payments collected for replacement workers and other harvest expenses.

Corruption, in combination with coercive government control of the cotton sector, and a lack of mechanisms to enable farmers to participate in decision-making processes, has enhanced climate change impacts on farmers. While Turkmenistan is facing rising temperatures, water scarcity, and soil salinization, cotton farmers reported restricted access to irrigation water, including being required to pay bribes to local officials to get their fields irrigated. These practices impact the cotton yields and significantly increase the burden on farmers to meet state-imposed production quotas, which do not reflect the current quality of the land and access to water.

The government of Turkmenistan severely restricts civic rights, including freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Authorities routinely target civic activists, government critics, and their families, including those in exile, with harassment and politically motivated prosecutions.⁵ All civil society organizations that are publicly critical of government repression, including Turkmen.News and the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, must work from exile. The independent labor monitors and informants who work with these organizations and provide evidence of forced labor conditions during the harvest, do so at great personal risk. In 2024 and 2025, the Turkmen government allowed the ILO to conduct monitoring of the annual cotton harvest. However, interference with their monitoring was a persistent challenge during both harvests.⁶ In addition to the cases documented by the ILO, in 2024, Turkmen.News monitors reported on a particular instance where the authorities prevented state employees at a medical facility from meeting with ILO monitors, and those who were allowed to speak with the ILO had been selected and ‘coached’ to falsely claim that state employees had not been mobilized to pick cotton.⁷

This repressive environment makes it impossible for state employees and farmers to challenge state policies, either individually or collectively. As the ILO recognized, “state-imposed forced labor operates through a pervasively coercive wider social context marked by a general lack of civic freedoms and a state apparatus that generates powerful coercive pressures.”⁸ This form of forced labor “creates an environment that renders its victims much less likely to speak freely”, where “non-cooperation entails a systemic risk that is often more implicit than overt.”⁹ For these reasons, it is vital that any steps towards reform by the Turkmen government to eliminate the use of state-imposed forced labor address the root causes of forced labor and center fundamental rights—especially freedom of association, freedom of expression, and collective bargaining rights.

“Technical” solutions such as the expansion of machine harvesting, which would eliminate the need for handpicking, are unable to effectively address the root causes of forced labor. In the 2025 cotton harvest, some state employees told monitors that when machines are used to harvest the cotton, they are still forced to clean the machines and pick (up) the cotton that the machines left behind. This clearly shows that without reforms prioritizing labor rights, mechanization of the harvest will continue perpetuating a repressive environment.

Governments and international organizations should increase political and economic pressure on the Turkmen government to build on its formal engagement with the ILO and make real progress toward eliminating state-imposed forced labor. This requires ensuring that in their diplomatic engagements, it is highlighted that the Turkmen government should take steps to address root causes of forced labor, protect labor rights and empower workers, allow human rights activists and independent labor rights monitors to operate freely without fear of retaliation, and increase farmers’ autonomy.

In Uzbekistan, where the government for decades used systemic forced labor in the harvest, consistent action over years by all stakeholder groups—including UN bodies, policy makers, brands and retailers, and civil society—was essential to pressure the government to reform its system until the elimination of systemic state-imposed forced labor in 2021.¹⁰ The Uzbekistan experience also shows that without expanding workers’ fundamental rights, reforms of a primarily economic nature are not enough to achieve decent work. In Uzbekistan, risks of forced labor persist as a result of ongoing restrictions on freedom of association, government coercion of farmers, and a lack of accountability for private and state actors threatening and intimidating labor rights monitors, workers, and farmers.¹¹



Methodology

Turkmen cotton: high risk cotton in global supply chains

Brands and retailers face the risk of cotton made with state-imposed forced labor in Turkmenistan entering their cotton supply chains at all stages of production. Suppliers in third countries, in particular Türkiye and Pakistan, but also EU member countries including Portugal and Italy, among others, use cotton, yarn, and fabric originating in Turkmenistan.

Increasingly more jurisdictions are adopting import bans against products made with forced labor, including Turkmen cotton. Imports and sale of products made in whole or in part with forced labor will be banned across the entire European Union (EU) as the application of the Forced Labour Regulation unfolds from the end of 2027. Specifically, all products made with cotton originating in Turkmenistan have already been banned from entry into the United States (US) since 2018. Canada and Mexico have also introduced legislation banning imports of products made with forced labor, and efforts are underway to introduce similar bans across other jurisdictions.

Compliance requires elimination of Turkmen cotton at all levels of the supply chain.

To meet their requirements to responsible business conduct under the OECD Guidelines for Responsible Conduct¹² and UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights,¹³ and comply with laws governing imports and human rights due diligence in supply chains, companies must map out their entire textile supply chains, down to the raw material level, and eliminate all cotton originating in Turkmenistan.

This report is based on independent civil society monitoring conducted by Turkmen.News and Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights monitors, and is supplemented by desk research. Between August - December 2025, monitors working with Turkmen.News and Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights conducted monitoring of the cotton harvest all five cotton producing regions of Turkmenistan: Dashoguz, Balkan, Mary, Lebap, and Ahal. The monitoring findings are supplemented with information provided throughout and after the harvest by informants who are farmers or state employees forced to pick cotton or pay for replacement pickers. Due to security concerns, the number of monitors and informants, as well as the sectors in which they work and other identifying details such as precise monitoring locations are not included in this report. Some photographs used in this report have been edited to conceal information that could identify interview subjects and monitoring locations.

The monitors have years of experience in documenting forced labor and other human and labor rights violations in the cotton sector in Turkmenistan. The monitors generally live in the areas they monitor, which gives them unique access to a range of sources, including farmers, pickers, state employees who are forced to pay for harvest expenses, and local officials and directors of state institutions.

The monitors visit the cotton fields, the pick-up and drop-off points for pickers and the cotton delivery points, interview pickers and farmers, and record audiovisual materials during their field trips. The monitors record specific details of how the harvest is carried out in the districts or fields they monitor, including: the start and duration of the cotton picking, the location(s) where the pickers gather before being transported to the fields, picking location(s), how many pickers (and from which organizations) were mobilized to the fields, the working conditions in the fields and the living conditions in temporary accommodation where some pickers stay overnight, how much pickers are paid and what the payment procedure is, and when the pickers are returned to the city.

The monitors follow a strict safety protocol and conduct interviews with pickers in the fields only when they assess it is safe. The monitors ask pickers questions regarding the duration and frequency of picking by employees from their organization, who gives them orders to pick, the amounts extorted from employees to avoid picking cotton themselves, the direct and perceived threats used in the extortion, how often employees are required to pay, and who collects the money. To minimize the risk of exposure and protect both the pickers and the monitors, the monitors do not conduct surveys or record the interviews in writing. The interviews are recorded using voice recorders.

Turkmen.News and Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights also gathered detailed information about the farmers' experiences, including with respect to challenges in meeting cotton production quotas, costs of cotton production, and interactions with district and regional administrations.

The monitors and informants communicate with Turkmen.News and Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights through secure, encrypted channels. The monitors receive training on domestic and international labor laws and provisions, interviewing techniques, data collection and reporting methodology, and physical and cybersecurity. Because of the repressive environment in Turkmenistan, these training sessions are conducted outside the country.

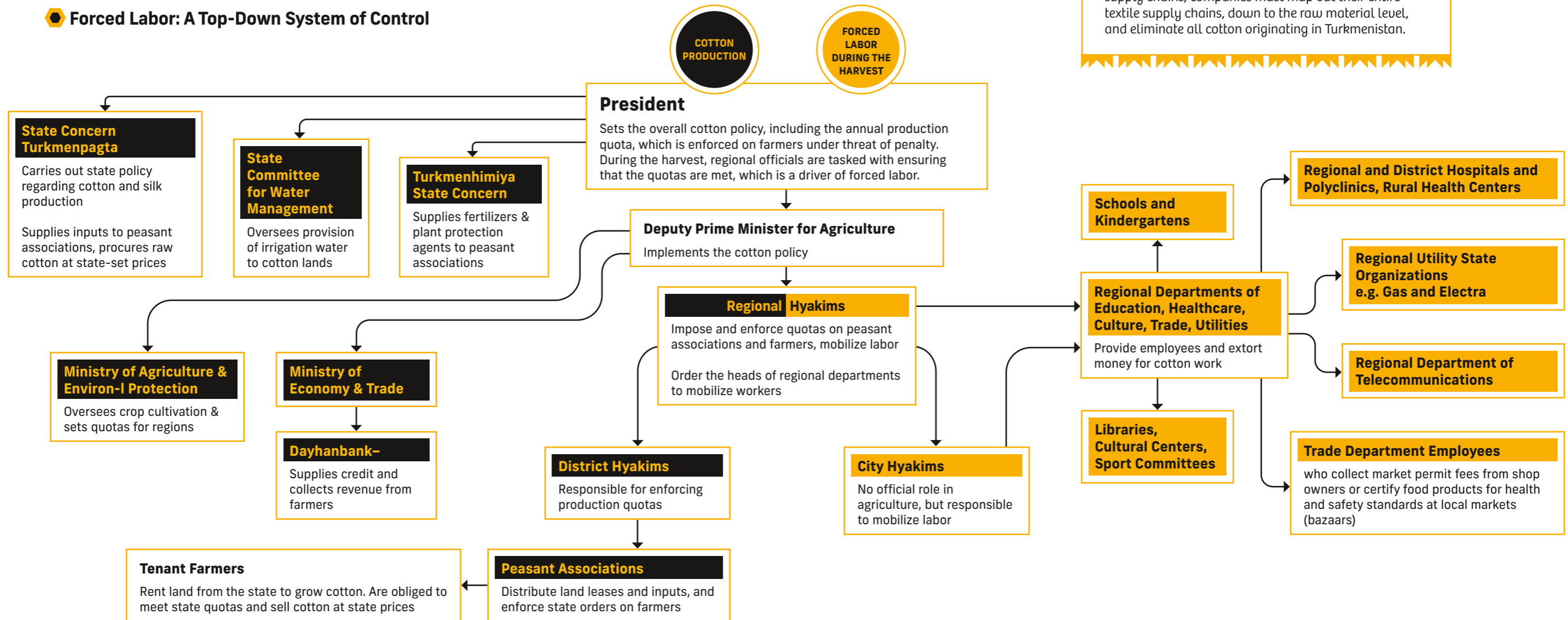
The information in the chapter 'Forced Labor Turkmen Cotton in Global Supply Chains' is based on findings of supply chain research conducted by Cotton Campaign member organizations, using a combination of desk-based tools, including analysis of data retrieved through open and private trade databases.

State-Imposed Forced Labor in the 2025 Cotton Harvest

Companies sourcing cotton cannot use or increase leverage to prevent or remediate forced labor on Turkmen farms

Given that the Turkmen government uses systemic state-imposed forced labor, it is impossible for brands and retailers to conduct any credible due diligence on the ground to prevent or remedy forced labor. For this reason, to comply with current and upcoming laws governing imports and human rights due diligence in supply chains, companies must map out their entire textile supply chains, down to the raw material level, and eliminate all cotton originating in Turkmenistan.

Forced Labor: A Top-Down System of Control



In Turkmenistan, the government uses systemic state-imposed forced labor during the annual cotton harvest. Through the chain of command illustrated above, the government forces public sector employees—including teachers, doctors, daycare workers, staff of schools, kindergartens, hospitals, utilities organizations, and cultural centers—to pick cotton or pay for a replacement picker. Exceptions apply to employees of security and law enforcement agencies, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of National Security, the prosecutor's office, and the judiciary.

The Turkmen government maintains a monopsony-monopoly over all the country's cotton production. It establishes an annual production quota, sets the price at which it will purchase cotton from farmers, and determines the cost of production. The annual production quota is established through presidential decree. Each regional governor is tasked with ensuring that the regional quota is fulfilled—which is a key driver of forced labor.

Intense top-down pressure to meet cotton production quotas causes officials at the regional, district, and local levels to intervene and exert control over nearly every aspect of cotton production, including determining the start and end dates of the cotton harvest, the progress of work, and the mobilization of state employees to pick cotton.

Forced Labor in the 2025 Cotton Harvest

“Forced labor is used in a variety of ways [in Turkmenistan], including cleaning streets and roadsides, working in agriculture—from cotton thinning to cotton picking—, rearing silk worms, and working for free at government events and during presidential visits.”

A local source of Radio Azatlyk¹⁴

In the 2025 cotton harvest, the government of Turkmenistan continued to force public sector employees to pick cotton or pay for replacement pickers under threat of penalty, such as loss of employment. In 2025, the cotton harvest started at the beginning of August, as early as August 3 in some districts, and ended mid-December.

Pick or pay

The “pick or pay” element is deeply entrenched in the forced labor system. Specifically, those working in state-funded institutions, or dependent on government employment or benefits, are required to harvest cotton themselves or secure a replacement to work in their place. Employees are required to hire their own replacement workers or pay money to their managers who act as (self-designated) middlemen, to arrange for replacement labor. For example, at Mary City Polyclinic No. 1, employees were forced to travel to rural areas in extreme heat to recruit replacement pickers, including elderly staff. Even when replacements were hired, responsibility for their performance remained with the employee, with designated senior staff monitoring pickers and contacting workers if quotas were not being met.¹⁵

While the government announced the official start of the cotton harvest on September 10,¹⁶ local administrations in some regions and districts had already been mobilizing or extorting state employees. The extortion of public sector employees started in early August in Lebap and Mary regions. For example, in Mary region, teachers and healthcare workers were extorted money to pay for replacement pickers and harvest expenses starting from August 3.¹⁷ In Lebap region, mass mobilization started on August 12 when public sector employees were sent to pick cotton to Darganata, Chardzhev, Koytendag, and other districts.¹⁸ In Dashoguz region, kindergarten staff, school teachers, healthcare workers, employees of cultural institutions, as well as technical personnel were mobilized starting on Sunday, August 17. Those who refused to pick cotton were forced by their administrations to contribute 25 manat (\$1.25) per day.¹⁹ Similarly, in Balkan region, the cotton harvest began in the middle of August.²⁰

Public authorities mobilised employees despite the cotton not having reached the harvest stage. For instance, healthcare employees in Lebap region were given a daily quota of 25 kilograms and were in the fields from 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. although there was not much cotton to harvest. Officials of the local khyakimlik regularly visited the cotton fields to monitor the pickers. According to a nurse from the Koytendag district hospital, “at best, we can pick 15 kilograms, no more. And that’s because the cotton is raw. Several times a day, a vehicle from the municipal

administration comes to inspect the fields. We mostly pretend to work, but in reality, we’re just walking around the fields.”²¹

The amounts and the frequency with which state employees were extorted money to pay for replacement pickers varied across different institutions and regions, ranging from 20 - 50 manats (US\$1 - US\$2.6) per day. In general, workers with a higher income were extorted to pay for replacement pickers, while those with a lower income were mobilized to pick cotton themselves. For example, doctors at the new multidisciplinary hospital and the infectious diseases hospital in Turkmenabat, were required to contribute 50 manat (US\$2.6) per day.²² Workers at the Turkmenabat Silk Production Association and knitting factory were extorted to pay for hired cotton pickers 30 manat (US\$1.50) per day.²³ In Dashoguz region, public sector employees were forced to contribute 25 manat (US\$1.3) per day.²⁴ Staff were split into groups and took turns to contribute money, mainly twice a week 20-30 (US\$1 - US\$1.5) manats each time. Meanwhile, employees at medical facilities in Mary region were forced to pay 150 manat (US\$7.7) per month to hire cotton pickers.²⁵

Mobilization of private sector employees

As in previous years, some private sector employees were also forced to participate in the cotton harvest. According to Radio Azatlyk, authorities in Bereket and Gyzylyarbat districts in Balkan region mobilized private businesses and their staff to pick cotton. As an entrepreneur based in Bereket district stated, “They are even sending employees of the Bereket and Gyzylyarbat markets to pick cotton. Because of the forced harvest, markets, shops, wedding venues, and car washes are only allowed to operate after 5:30 p.m.; the rest of the time sellers and entrepreneurs are sent to the cotton fields.” Residents said that only three private shops and car washes in these cities were able to operate throughout the day because: “Their owners have ‘backs’ in the local offices of the Ministry of National Security and the Prosecutor’s office.”²⁶ Moreover, according to Turkmen.News monitors, some managers of bazaars, for example in Mary region, required merchants to pay for harvest expenses. The practice was not coordinated across all bazaars, increasing the likelihood that some managers collected money on their own initiative and for their personal benefit.

The daily quota for cotton pickers was 25 kilograms per day at the start of the cotton harvest in August and it reached 50 kilograms per day during the peak of the season. For instance, at the Lebap Velayat Health Department the daily quota was 45 kilograms for doctors, nurses, orderlies, and technical staff at hospitals and clinics in the region.²⁷ However, most state employees could only pick 30-35 kilograms because cotton picking is very hard and labor intensive work.

Every institution had a quota for the number of people they needed to provide to pick cotton. For example, the Post Office in Dashoguz region was required to provide 10-15 people per day. Each organization decided internally who from their staff goes to the fields, sometimes taking turns. In every region employees and replacement pickers were required to gather at a special pickup point at as early as 5 am, while it was still dark and cold. There was a person in charge of checking people’s names and verifying they are on the lists provided by various institutions. In some cases, for example in Dashoguz region, pickers were also sent to fields far away from their homes and had to stay overnight.

Workers were paid by tenant farmers for the cotton they picked. Payment was usually made on the spot at the end of the day. However, in cases when farmers picked cotton themselves with their families and did not require additional labor on their fields, farmers refused to make payments to the pickers (state employees) mobilized by the local authorities. In previous years, when most public sector employees were mobilized to pick cotton, farmers would sometimes delay payment for days or weeks, often in collusion with the officials. This practice became less common in 2025, as most pickers in the 2025 harvest were hired replacement pickers who were voluntarily picking cotton to earn cash, and who generally refused to leave the fields until they were paid.²⁸

“Technical” solutions like using machine harvesting are insufficient to eliminate forced labor

The Turkmen government has made investments to expand machine harvesting. However, such ‘technical’ solutions are unable to effectively address the root causes of forced labor and the use of harvesters is not an adequate indicator to measure progress toward elimination of forced labor. In the 2025 cotton harvest, even when machines were used to harvest cotton, state employees were forced to collect the cotton left behind by the machines or to clean the machines. A state employee from Balkan region said, “We collect the waste left after the combine harvesters. Cleaning up the tracks of cotton harvesters is almost the same as cleaning up garbage. Collecting cotton lint which is now mixed with the soil is more difficult than picking cotton.” Several employees and farmers who were involved in the cotton harvest shared that “no yarn suitable for producing any textile products will come out of this cotton waste,” adding that this “only contributes to the state’s cotton commitment being a lie.”²⁹

CASE STUDY: FORCED LABOR IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

“When I say ‘teacher’ in Turkmenistan, I think of someone who picks cotton, cleans the streets, and carries a live billboard at events... When I see the teachers who taught me 30 years ago, I still respect them and don’t even cross their path. Today’s youth do not hesitate to fight with their teachers. There is no respect for teachers, nor is their word listened to”.

A teacher, Balkan region³⁰

Forced mobilization of teachers to pick cotton was ordered by the Ministry of Education and was enforced by respective administrative units.³¹ The Lebap Velayat Department of Education informed city schools that the amounts teachers would be extorted to pay for hiring replacement cotton pickers would be tied to their salary levels. At schools No. 2, 15, 20, 21, 22, 28, 31, and 41 in Turkmenabat, teachers earning under 1,600 (US\$82) manat had to pay 30 manat (US\$1.50) per day, those earning over 2,000 manat (US\$102.6) had to pay 60 manat (US\$3.1) and higher-qualified teachers receiving both higher salaries and pensions had to pay 100 manat (US\$5.1) per day. While teachers in urban schools were extorted money, teachers in rural schools could pick cotton themselves instead of paying for replacement pickers. However, this did not exempt

them from their daily duties, including writing duties and preparing lesson content and assessments. As a result, many teachers opted to pay for replacement pickers. Temporary workers, for example heating maintenance workers, were required to pay the same rates as teachers, despite having unstable employment and incomes, making them among the most vulnerable groups impacted by the forced labor system.³²

Teachers were split into groups and took turns to contribute money and to pick cotton on Sundays. For instance, they would pay for a replacement picker every few days and pick cotton at least one or two Sundays a month, on their only day off. Cleaning and technical staff of schools and other institutions participated in picking cotton by taking turns and going to the fields every other day, alternating cotton picking with their regular duties.³³

The use of state-imposed forced labor in cotton production outside the harvest season

In addition to the annual harvest, state employees are often forced to conduct agricultural work to maintain the cotton crop, including thinning, weeding, and topping of cotton plants, and cleaning the fields. For example, teachers in Bereket district of Balkan region were forced to participate in weeding of the cotton fields in July 2025.³⁴ In early August, employees at health and educational institutions in Bereket district were forced to perform thinning of cotton plants or to contribute 60 manats (US\$3.1) per employee to hire a replacement worker.³⁵

Although teachers are legally entitled to 45 days of annual leave,³⁶ many are required to return after 30 days based on verbal instructions from the Ministry of Education, often to assist with cotton-related work. A teacher from Balkan region explained: “It doesn’t matter if you are on vacation, the state can call you back to work and take you to any job it wants.”³⁷ A former teacher at the School of Culture and Arts said, “It was precisely because of such circumstances that I voluntarily resigned.”³⁸

The mass mobilisation of teachers for cotton-related work not only undermines the quality of education, but it also erodes respect for the teaching profession in Turkmenistan. As one teacher from Balkan region observed, “Where can there be an educated generation in a country where respect for teachers is so low?” Teachers report that repeated mobilisation, first for field preparation and later for cotton picking, has damaged their professional standing. One teacher described students mocking them, saying, “Teacher, you were cleaning the streets yesterday. How much money did the government give you? Come clean my house too, and I will pay you.”³⁹

Agricultural students forced to pick cotton

Students at the Dashoguz Agricultural Institute were also sent to pick cotton at the start of the harvest season, disrupting their studies and replacing coursework with mandatory “internships”. Students were not provided with hot meals and were paid 0.20 manat (US\$0.01) per kilogram at the beginning of the season and 0.40 manat (US\$0.02) later in the harvest, when cotton is scarce. At the end of the harvest, they could only pick five to six kilograms per day, earning merely 2 to 3 manats (US\$0.10 - US\$0.15). A second-year agronomy student said, “We work for three months, but we can’t even afford shoes, which wear out during that time.” Another student added, “We eat cold snacks. We buy everything ourselves or our families bring it from home. Many have developed gastritis or ulcers over the years.” According to students, “The dean refuses to accept medical exemption certificates, including from those allergic to cotton flowers, and threatens expulsion if students don’t participate in the cotton harvest.” The university administration was not concerned with the students missing class, as long as mobilizing students to the fields prevented complaints from the Ministry of Education or the regional hakimlik.⁴⁰

In the context of ongoing repression of civic freedoms in Turkmenistan, in combination with the threats, either perceived or explicit, that they will lose their wages or their jobs if they do not pick cotton or pay for replacement pickers, teachers and other public sector workers are unable to challenge the forced labor system.

The employees have no complaint mechanism through which they can file complaints against their superiors. In Mary region, when public sector employees attempted to challenge the requirement to make payments to hire replacement pickers, they were retaliated against by being forced to pick cotton themselves. Employees were required to pick cotton from 6:00 a.m. until 7:00 p.m. Following this retaliatory behavior, workers agreed to pay for replacement pickers. As one employee summed up, “Such oppression was used to make people agree to pay.”⁴¹ In another case of extortion, in Bereket, Gyzylarbat, and Magtymguly districts in Balkan region, teachers were forced to pay for harvest expenses until the last week of November, despite the fact that the cotton had already been harvested. As one worker described, “They collect 220 manats (US\$11.1) for each week. There are times when the deputy director of the school interrupts the lessons of teachers who have not paid the required money on time, humiliates them in front of the students, and begs them for money for the cotton harvest.” As a teacher at school No. 1 in Bereket district explained, they can not challenge this decision, saying that “The deputy directors tell teachers who do not pay the money, ‘You can resign of your own free will, write a letter of resignation, or we will immediately convene a team from the district education department and take the necessary measures so that you cannot find another job.’”⁴²

Teachers consider complaining to be futile or dangerous. “Not only deputy school principals, but also senior management of health institutions and other sectors are acting like a criminal group or mafia. It’s useless to complain to legal institutions about them, because they might find you guilty instead,” said a resident of Balkan region.⁴³ According to him, people who complain are usually threatened with, “Are you a foreign agent? Maybe you’re giving information against our state to the American media? We have to check you, leave your phone. We will hand it over to the 7th Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and we will have to study you thoroughly.”⁴⁴ A teacher added that fear of being suspected and punished discourages employees from complaining. According to her, many Turkmen are well aware of cases of retaliation against

citizens who demand their rights, and even if they initially filed a complaint, they would eventually withdraw it saying ‘I just want to get out of this safely.’⁴⁵

Given the repressive environment in Turkmenistan, monitoring and reporting on forced labor in the cotton harvest remains very risky. On 20 May, 2025, in Vekilbazar district, Mary region, a local resident was detained and interrogated by the Ministry of National Security after filming state employees—kindergarten staff, including cleaners and nannies—weeding in the cotton fields. He was released only after his phone had been inspected and the video deleted. Following the incident, local authorities ordered brigadiers and agronomists to prevent any filming of workers brought to the fields from institutions in the city.⁴⁶

THE ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS IN THE FORCED LABOR SYSTEM

In Turkmenistan, workers have no independent trade unions to protect them from forced labor in their workplaces. Freedom of association and collective bargaining rights are severely constrained, as the government controls trade union activity and appoints union leadership.⁴⁷ Workers are not allowed to form independent unions, and there are no laws protecting the right to strike. Many workers avoid collective activities to try and improve their working conditions due to fear of punishment.⁴⁸ In its observations adopted in 2025, the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) again urged the government of Turkmenistan to take all steps required to respect in law and in practice the principles of freedom of association, in accordance with the ILO Convention 87 on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise.⁴⁹

The National Center of Trade Unions (NCTU), which is state-controlled, dominates all union activity in the country. Instead of protecting workers from state-imposed forced labor, NCTU representatives often direct mobilization or coordinate money collection in workplaces. In state enterprises—including hospitals, postal offices, and schools—the trade union representatives usually hold the chief of staff position. This dual role makes them responsible for mobilization and money collection.

For example, at one school in Turkmenabat city, at a meeting where the principal was castigating some teachers for failing to pay money for harvest expenses, the trade union representative also scolded the teachers and told them to view the payments as voluntary. She urged staff to make these payments as they were making a “donation,” and emphasized that meeting the school’s quota for replacement pickers was mandatory.⁵⁰

Acknowledging pressure from higher authorities, the school principal stated, “I have no choice. If they [hakimlik authorities] demand from me, I have to demand from you. I cannot demand it from my family.” Teachers were told that refusing to pick cotton means they oppose government policy.⁵¹ Teachers were required to contribute money every third day, or roughly ten times per month. The school sent 36 people on weekdays and 46 people on Sundays to the fields to pick, including some of its own technical and teaching staff. The director warned, “If you are in a condition to teach lessons, then you are also in a condition to pick cotton. You are not picking my cotton,” and threatened to submit lists of non-compliant teachers to the authorities. She also announced stricter oversight, requiring schools to report daily by 7:00 p.m. to the regional hakimlik on exemptions, participation, replacement labor, and quota compliance.⁵²

CASE STUDY: FORCED LABOR IN THE HEALTHCARE SECTOR

“More than 60% of nurses in health centers in urban areas in Turkmenabat have quit their jobs. They are all tired of being forced to pick cotton.”

A healthcare worker in Turkmenabat city⁵³

On 8 September, the Ministry of Health issued a direct order for mobilization of medical staff, from doctors to orderlies, to pick cotton.⁵⁴ The Lebap Velayat Health Department subsequently imposed a daily cotton-picking quota of 45 kilograms on doctors, nurses, orderlies, and technical staff across hospitals and clinics. At Turkmenabat’s Multidisciplinary Hospital and Infectious Diseases Hospital, doctors were required to pick cotton even after night shifts or pay 50 manats (US\$2.6) per day to hire a replacement.⁵⁵ Similar practices were reported at the Third City Health Center in Turkmenabat, where doctors paid 100 manats (US\$5.1) per week, while nurses and technical staff paid 60 manats (US\$3.1). According to a doctor at the Infectious Diseases Hospital, during the harvest season up to two-thirds of medical workers’ salaries were spent on hiring replacement labor, as many could not pick cotton after shifts or on weekends.⁵⁶ Staff at several medical institutions in Mary region were required to pay 150 manats (US\$7.7) per month to fund hired cotton pickers.⁵⁷



Mobilization of healthcare employees to pick cotton created staff shortages and had a significant impact on the quality of healthcare delivery services. © Turkmen.News

Forced mobilisation and financial extortion during the cotton harvest had severe consequences for healthcare delivery. At Lebap Velayat General Hospital, a large number of doctors were assigned to the fields, creating acute staff shortages. Patients reportedly queued to see doctors from 5:00 a.m., despite official opening hours at 9:00 a.m, and brought water, food, and blankets to wait outside. A nurse confirmed a chronic shortage of doctors, noting that vacancies remain unfilled and that “when the remaining staff are sent to the cotton fields under ministerial orders, the situation becomes critical.”⁵⁸

Anecdotal information suggests that many healthcare workers decided to quit their jobs due to forced labor and financial extortions. For example, at City Polyclinic No. 2 in Turkmenabat city, Lebap region, only 11 nurses remained; within one week alone, three family nurses resigned, doubling the workload of those who stayed without commensurate pay.⁵⁹ A healthcare worker at the Third City Health Center said, “I had 1,500 households under my care, and now their number has reached 3,000 because I have also taken on the residents of the district where another nurse left her job.”⁶⁰ Similar resignations were reported at Polyclinics No. 3, No. 4, and No. 5. In mid-October, clinic managers reduced the amounts extorted from workers from 50 to 30 manats, but this failed to stop resignations. Attempts to rehire retired or previously resigned specialists were unsuccessful.⁶¹

Due to staff shortages, doctors were routinely assigned outside their specialties. “A neurologist additionally performs the work of an ophthalmologist, a radiologist performs the work of an ENT (ear, nose, throat) doctor,” said a healthcare worker in Charjev district, adding that “everyone is running away.”

In Mary region, technical workers, earning around 1,000 manats (US\$51.3) per month, reported that after compulsory cotton contributions “there is practically nothing left to live on.”⁶² Those who quit their jobs often migrate to Russia or Türkiye, or search for jobs outside the public sector.⁶³ Despite the severity of the labor crisis, authorities relied on persuasion and threats to retain staff, rather than addressing extortions or improving working conditions.

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON WOMEN

The state-imposed forced labor system in Turkmenistan has a disproportionate impact on women, who account for the majority of public sector workers and are heavily represented in the workforces of schools, kindergartens and hospitals. Women constitute 74% of healthcare workers and the majority of teachers: 96% of teachers in pre-primary education, 83% in primary, and 62% in secondary education are women.⁶⁴ Furthermore, women are overrepresented in low-wage support roles which do not require special education or qualifications—such as caretakers in residential buildings, school janitors, hospital orderlies, and kindergarten nannies.⁶⁵ This means they cannot afford to hire replacements and are more likely than male public sector employees to engage directly in cotton picking. Video recordings and photos taken by labor rights monitors show that the majority of pickers were women, with the exception of a few men who were mainly carrying the sacks filled with cotton.⁶⁶ Women do not have safe working conditions, access to bathrooms, clean water, or proper protective equipment during cotton harvesting.

Moreover, women in Turkmenistan continue being suppressed in public life⁶⁷ and lack representation and decision-making power.⁶⁸ These factors not only shrink civic space for women to speak out against forced labor, but could also increase the risk of gender-based violence such as sexual harassment, including during cotton picking.⁶⁹ Turkmenistan is a closed country with no independent women’s rights organizations to raise such issues.⁷⁰

WORKING AND LIVING CONDITIONS FOR COTTON PICKERS

Cotton picking is physically demanding and hazardous manual labor. At the start of the harvest in August, temperatures in the fields frequently reach 40°C (104°F), while by December pickers work in cold, damp conditions, often below freezing temperature. Cotton pickers work in open fields without shade, adequate drinking water, or protective equipment, while farmers do not provide information or warnings to pickers about the chemicals used in the fields.

These conditions are exacerbated by climate change. According to a recent World Bank report, Turkmenistan is among the countries most exposed to extreme heat, with the number of extreme heat days projected to nearly double and productivity losses to reach up to 5%.⁷¹ The number of extreme heat days per year is expected to rise from 45 to 66 days in Turkmenabat and from 41 to 56 days in Dashoguz between 2015 and 2030, both of which are major cotton producing regions. Extreme heat poses serious risks to human health and mortality; although cotton-growing areas were not directly assessed, heat-related mortality in Ashgabat reached 25–27.5 deaths per 100,000 people between 2000 and 2020 and is expected to increase further. These trends underscore the heightened health risks faced by cotton pickers during prolonged harvest seasons under worsening climatic conditions.⁷²

As in previous years, living conditions for pickers deployed far from home were poor and unsanitary. Many travelled 30 minutes to two hours daily or were required to stay overnight. This was particularly common in Dashoguz region, including Ruhybelent district near the border with Uzbekistan. There, cotton plots range from 20 to 100 hectares, which is much larger than the size of most plots (5 hectares). Due to the remoteness and size of the fields, workers were forced to remain on-site for several days.⁷³

Pickers were also compelled to work in dangerous weather conditions. During a three-day salt storm on 22 August, authorities continued cotton picking despite fields being covered in salt and dust. A doctor in Dashoguz reported: “The worst thing is that almost all people who were forced to pick cotton in the dust began to get sick and went to the hospital.”⁷⁴

In Balkan region, budget employees and replacement pickers from Gyzylarbat district were sent to cotton fields far away from home, in neighboring Ahal region, including Bamy, Borme, Nohur, Archman, Kelete, and Murche districts. Employees were taken by bus for daily harvesting and from October, they were also sent for overnight stays. An employee quoted their department head saying, “Since residents of Ahal region are more socio-economically secure than those of Balkan, residents of some Ahal districts do not touch the cotton harvest at all. That is why people from other districts, even from neighboring districts of Balkan, are forcibly sent to pick cotton.” Meanwhile, workers reported no basic conditions in Geokdepe and Baherden districts. “There is no way to have a decent lunch. If we can eat watermelon and half a loaf of bread in the dirt and dust, we are ‘throwing our hats to the sky,’” said a budget worker from Gyzylarbat.⁷⁵

CASE STUDY: FORCED LABOR OF MILITARY CONSCRIPTS

As in previous years, in the 2025 harvest, conscript soldiers were deployed as unpaid labor. In Turkmenistan, men aged 18 and older are subject to compulsory military service. However, in accordance with the ILO standards derived from the ILO Forced Labour Convention (No. 29) and the ILO Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (No. 105), requiring conscripts to perform work not of a “purely military character” and for purposes of economic development, such as cotton picking, constitutes state-imposed forced labor.⁷⁶ The following examples illustrate this practice.

In Ahal region, soldiers were mobilised to pick cotton from August 25 to November 30, with the entire brigade involved. Soldiers were divided into groups of 15–18 people, each supervised by an officer and a senior commander. Each soldier was required to pick at least 35 kilograms of cotton per day, with an informal target of 50 kilograms. Failure to meet quotas resulted in punishment.⁷⁷ According to soldiers’ accounts, cotton was harvested in Sarahs district, located 1–1.5 hours from their base. Soldiers woke up at 5:00 a.m. They were then transported in around 20 buses, each carrying 30–35 soldiers, some forced to sit on the floor. Upon arrival, soldiers were provided sacks to pick cotton and worked until evening. They ate lunch in the fields in unhygienic conditions, from dishes often contaminated by insects and sand. Work continued until it got dark in the fields: 6–7:00 p.m. during the summer, 5:30–6:00 p.m. in October, and 4:30–5:00 p.m. in November. They picked cotton every day except Sunday.⁷⁸

Soldiers who failed to meet cotton quotas faced physical punishment. In one case, an officer beat a soldier for picking too little cotton, leaving him on the ground covered in blood.⁷⁹ While the landowners paid 1 manat (US\$0.051) per kilogram directly to the commanders, the soldiers did not receive any payment. Commanders reportedly claimed the money would be used to improve conditions in the barracks, yet soldiers said that “nothing was really improved.”⁸⁰



In accordance with the ILO Forced Labour Convention (No. 29) and the ILO Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (No. 105), requiring conscripts to perform work not of a “purely military character” and for purposes of economic development—such as picking cotton—constitutes state-imposed forced labor.
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Coercion and Exploitation of Farmers

“If we file a complaint, the next day we will lose our land and our annual contract.”

A tenant farmer⁹⁰

In Turkmenistan, almost all agricultural land is state-owned, and its use is regulated through two main structures: *dayhan birleşikleri* (state farm associations, formerly collective farms) and *dayhan hojalyklary* (private farms). Farmers do not own land. They lease land through state farm associations or from private land owners. In both cases, the state controls the conditions under which tenant farmers work, including by setting mandatory crop allocation, production quotas, and procurement prices.



In Turkmenistan, the government exerts tremendous coercive power over farmers. Cotton farmers have no ability to challenge the conditions under which they grow and sell cotton. © Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights

Within this agricultural system, there are three main types of land users. Small-scale tenant farmers, who typically lease one to five hectares through state farm associations on short-term contracts of one or two years. These are the farmers who produce most of the cotton in Turkmenistan. These farmers operate under strict state control, with limited autonomy over which crops they can grow, access to inputs, and the prices at which they sell their crops to the state.

Large landholders can operate within both state associations and private structures. Sometimes they may lease large plots in remote areas with low land demand such as Ruhybelent or Saparmyrat Turkmenbashi districts in Dashoguz region. These landholders are privileged over

In Lebap region, soldiers from the School of Junior Aviation Specialists (SHMAS) in Turkmenabat (Gagarin microdistrict) were similarly forced to pick cotton from early September until 30 November. Trainees from different parts of Turkmenistan sent to SHMAS for three-month courses, including those training as cooks, were deployed to the fields despite having no agricultural role.⁸¹ Soldiers were given daily quotas of 45–50 kilograms of cotton. Those who picked less than 40 kilograms were punished through beatings, denial of showers, forced physical exercises, and were required to write explanatory notes. Like in Ahal, soldiers in Lebap received no payment. Some were told the money went “to the unit,” but soldiers reported that “in reality, no one buys them anything.” Food was delivered from the unit, supplemented by farmers with bread and water. Sunday was the only day off.⁸²

Radio Azatlyk also reported similar instances where soldiers picked cotton with overnight stays in Archman village, Ahal region⁸³, and how those who did not meet the cotton quota were deprived of dinner.⁸⁴

Child Labor

Child labor is illegal in Turkmenistan and in 2024 the Turkmen government classified the professions of “cotton picker” and “cotton grower” as harmful and hazardous work, which is prohibited for people under 18.⁸⁵ However, in 2025, like in previous years, children continued to pick cotton, primarily due to worsening economic conditions and family hardship. According to UNICEF, 4% of children in Turkmenistan live in severe food poverty and 27% face moderate food poverty.⁸⁶ Radio Azatlyk reported on increasing cases of children begging and engaging in hazardous work, which provides important context for the use of child labor in the cotton harvest. According to educators, some children attend school only two days a week, spending the remaining time working. Examples include children aged 13–14 years old collecting plastic bottles, carrying heavy goods in markets, unloading flour and sugar, or working at brick factories and using all money earned in a day—around 50 manats (US\$2.6)—to buy food. In rural areas, 16–17-year-old boys were reported to work in construction, transporting cement and concrete for long days and earning up to 100 manats (US\$5.1) per day. As the economic crisis deepens and children look for work, these examples underscore broader patterns of state neglect that leave families reliant on child labor, including during the cotton harvest season.⁸⁷

In some cases, parents who could not afford to hire replacement pickers or were unable to pick cotton themselves sent their children to pick cotton instead of them. In other cases, children were hired as (replacement) pickers. Labor rights monitors reported on children of 13–15 years of age picking cotton and carrying sacks filled with cotton. Children earned 50 manats (US\$2.6) per day if they collected 50 kilograms of cotton. In remote districts and villages, monitors reported instances of children missing school to pick cotton.⁸⁸

At some schools, children were required to fill in cleaning and other physical work duties while the technical staff were picking cotton. According to an education worker quoted by Radio Azatlyk, when school cleaning staff were sent to the cotton fields for 15-day overnight shifts, students were ordered to replace them: “Girls ... are forced to clean school toilets, classrooms, halls, and corridors. Boys are forced to dig, water gardens, and mow lawns.” He added that administrators assigned two students per class to daily cleaning duties, often selecting children whose parents were abroad or imprisoned.⁸⁹

small-scale farmers. They control dozens of hectares, sometimes through proxy arrangements or preferential allocation by local authorities. They often benefit from better access to water, machinery, inputs, and labor. They can grow cotton on a portion of their land and use the rest for more profitable crops. Their lease agreements are for one or two years. Private farm owners (daýhan hojalyklary) typically lease larger plots, 50 hectares or more, often under long-term contracts of up to 49 years. While they retain more operational control, they are still subject to state mandated crop allocation and cotton quotas. In practice, politically connected individuals consolidate access to large areas of land, while small tenant farmers carry the main burden of cotton production under the state-controlled system. This report describes the vulnerability of small-scale cotton tenant farmers and the conditions under which they work.

Farmers are required to cultivate crops that are prescribed by the state, primarily cotton, wheat, and rice.⁹¹ The state also controls access to the essential inputs for agricultural production, including machinery, irrigation water, fuel, fertilizers, pesticides, seeds, and defoliants, either by setting prices directly or regulating access through agricultural associations. The state establishes an annual production quota, sets the price at which it will purchase cotton from farmers, and determines the cost of production. Regional officials are tasked with ensuring that the regional quotas are fulfilled. They then impose these quotas on state farm associations, who bear responsibility for ensuring the production is met. In turn, the associations use punitive or coercive measures—such as the threat of cancellation of leases and land redistribution—to enforce production quotas on farmers.

In 2025, the state cotton quota remained unchanged at 1.25 million tons across approximately 580,000 hectares,⁹² while the procurement price remained 5,000 manats (US\$256.4) per ton for first-pass cotton. Every year the government sets an ambitious cotton quota and reports of successful fulfillment. However, in reality, farmers report that yields are increasingly low, while regional and local officials inflate the numbers to avoid being held accountable for declining production.⁹³

Factors contributing to a decline in production include environmental degradation, water scarcity, declining soil quality, and a lack of adequate inputs and machinery. Authorities acknowledged the deteriorating land productivity and are working with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to produce climate resilient cotton.⁹⁴ According to the Ministry of Agriculture, the state Cotton Research Institute focuses on developing higher-yield and stress-resistant cotton varieties, improving seed systems, and producing guidance on soil fertility, fertiliser use, pest control, and water-saving irrigation, as well as working with farmers and agricultural associations to transfer research into practice.⁹⁵ However, farmers across monitored regions reported no practical improvements. Instead, they explained they have limited access to water, fertilizers, and equipment, and that most of the time these inputs are selectively allocated to politically connected landholders. They also said that procurement prices set by the state are not enough to cover their production costs. Even more, in 2025, cotton yields were poor, which increased the financial burden on farmers, who had to absorb the production costs.

Tenant farmers operate within a system characterised by restricted freedom of choice, unequal access to resources, financial challenges, and exposure to environmental risk. The following sections examine these dynamics in detail.

🔹 Limited Access to Essential Inputs and Machinery for Cotton Cultivation

During the 2025 cotton season, tenant farmers continued to face barriers in accessing agricultural inputs and machinery. These challenges reflect entrenched corruption, abuse of authority, and preferential treatment of politically connected landholders. Farmers faced these problems throughout the entire season, from sowing to harvesting the cotton, which undermined their ability to meet state-imposed production quotas.

On December 30, 2025, President Serdar Berdimuhamedov signed a resolution calling for increased cotton production through the “rational use of land, water, agricultural machinery, and mineral fertilisers.” The resolution instructed the Ministry of Agriculture, five regional hakimliks, and other state agencies in charge of agricultural work (see graphic in Chapter 3), including “Türkmenpagta,” “Türkmenobahyzmat,” the State Water Management Committee, and “Türkmenhimiýa” to ensure timely provision of machinery, irrigation water, fertilisers, and high-quality cotton seed in line with agronomic standards.⁹⁶ However, as in previous years, farmers interviewed expressed frustration that these commitments did not translate into improved access to water and inputs or fair treatment. They described the vulnerability of farmers who have to work in conditions in which corruption and administrative indifference continued to undermine cotton production, making it impossible to meet state imposed quotas.

Large landholders, with political connections, have increasingly more access to inputs. Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights reported on one such example, in which the prosecutor of Khojambaz district in Lebap region controls 20 hectares near irrigation networks. The hectares were registered to fictitious individuals. The land is used to grow rice, which the prosecutor sells on the local market at a profit, instead of delivering it to the state. Unlike ordinary tenant farmers, the official does not pay for irrigation, seeds, fertilizer, or equipment use.⁹⁷

UNEQUAL ACCESS TO IRRIGATION WATER

“We need to plant crops that are suitable for our climate and do not require a lot of water, and we need to get rid of cotton slavery.”

*A water management expert*⁹⁸

Turkmenistan faces serious environmental pressures including rising temperatures, water scarcity, soil salinization, and broader ecosystem degradation. These have a negative impact on the production of water-intensive crops such as cotton and make it increasingly difficult for tenant farmers to meet state-imposed production quotas. Temperatures in Turkmenistan have risen by more than 1°C (33.8 °F) over the past two decades and are projected to increase by a further 1.5–2.4°C across Central Asia, intensifying heat stress, drought risk, and evapotranspiration, which raises irrigation demand. At the same time, the country's reliance on meltwater from shrinking glaciers in upstream states heightens long-term water insecurity, while more than 60% of Turkmenistan's irrigated land already suffers from salinity caused by inefficient irrigation and high evaporation.⁹⁹ These conditions leave farmers unable to irrigate fields in a timely or adequate manner, reduce yields, increase costs, and place producers at a structural disadvantage in fulfilling state-imposed cotton quotas under a centrally controlled production system.



While Turkmenistan is facing rising temperatures, water scarcity, and soil salinization, cotton farmers reported restricted access to irrigation water, including being required to pay bribes to local officials to get their fields irrigated. These practices impact the cotton yields and significantly increase the burden on farmers to meet state-imposed production quotas. © Turkmen.News

The State Committee for Water Management of Turkmenistan is responsible for managing irrigation water and overseeing irrigation infrastructure. Regional and district water authorities distribute water through canal systems according to the state agricultural plan, while farmers' associations organize irrigation schedules and notify tenant farmers when their fields can receive water. A document obtained by Turkmen.News outlining irrigation requirements for cotton cultivation in Dashoguz and Lebap regions recommends shifting from fixed irrigation schedules to a need-based water management system. The changes made were likely intended to address water shortages. In practice, however, farmers report that water supply falls far below these standards. While the guidance prescribes up to nine irrigation cycles, fields are typically irrigated only two or three times. This gap between prescribed irrigation requirements and actual water availability reduces yields and undermines farmers' ability to meet state-imposed cotton quotas, which are based on yield assessments assuming recommended water volumes are provided.¹⁰⁰

Cotton farmers report persistent shortages of irrigation water that impact crop development. Farmers faced water deficits even for winter irrigation, forcing many to rely on saline drainage water. In the Taze Yol agricultural association in Bayramaly district, Mary region, farmers used electric pumps to transfer collector water into irrigation canals.¹⁰¹ Similar shortages were reported in the Garavekil and Yaryk Gokche agricultural associations in Babadayhan district, Ahal region, where cotton fields did not receive winter irrigation because canals had remained dry since the previous autumn.¹⁰²

In Lebap region, farmers linked declining yields to severe irrigation failures. Most farmers along the Amu Darya River were able to irrigate cotton only once with fresh river water, after which they relied on highly mineralised collector water that contributed to secondary soil salinisation and damaged the cotton root systems. Plants dried prematurely, and both mature and forming bolls, as well as flowers and leaves, fell off. To limit the losses, local officials announced the beginning of the harvest very early in August, before the cotton would drop completely.¹⁰³ This was particularly evident in the Azatlyk agricultural association in Sayat district, Lebap region, where

tenants repeatedly requested that irrigation canals be cleaned and pumps repaired in line with agronomic schedules, but these requests were ignored. Farmers warned that without adequate irrigation, "their labor and financial investments will be in vain," leaving them unable to meet state cotton obligations, while bearing the full production risk.¹⁰⁴

Exploitation of tenant farmers by politically connected landholders

Large landholders are privileged over small scale tenant farmers. While they are also required on paper to meet state-imposed cotton quotas, large landholders have the means to produce enough cotton to meet their production plan on only a portion of their land, or they circumvent requirements through falsified reporting and bribery, and they can use the remaining land to grow more profitable crops to sell on the market. In some cases, large landholders lease out land to tenant farmers to grow the cotton. Investigations by Turkmen.News exposed how some private farms operate in practice. In one case in Lebap region, land previously managed by a state farm association was reclassified as unsuitable for agriculture and transferred to private ownership despite its prime location near the Amu Darya River. Local farmers were forced either to give up their land or work for the new private landholder. The landholder controlled around 1,200 hectares of fertile land with the protection of relatives holding senior government positions. Farmers leasing land from him were coerced into paying bribes to have access to irrigation water and were underpaid for their work. These practices pushed many households into debt and forced some farmers to abandon agriculture and migrate abroad for work. Following the farmers' leaving, public sector employees were mobilized to cultivate the abandoned cotton fields.¹⁰⁵

FERTILISER SHORTAGES AND UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION

Access to fertilisers, pesticides, and herbicides remained uneven during the 2025 season, reinforcing structural inequalities between tenant farmers and privileged landholders. Inputs supplied by the state concern "Türkmenhimiya" were prioritised for plots belonging to officials and influential individuals, where pre-sowing activities were completed on time.¹⁰⁶ Small scale farmers often received fertilisers late, in insufficient quantities, or not at all. Fields remained unprepared, despite autumn ploughing being a key agronomic practice. Delayed or absent autumn ploughing disrupts the agricultural cycle, reducing soil moisture retention and delaying sowing, which in turn lowers cotton yields and further undermines farmers' ability to meet state-imposed production quotas. Farmers' complaints to the management of the farmers' associations were dismissed. Instead, farmers were asked to raise these issues with the brigade supervisors, who they described as "impossible to find," effectively denying farmers access to remedies.¹⁰⁷ As one farmer in Ahal region warned: "If by March 15, the soil treatment with herbicides against weeds and pesticides against pests is not completed, there is a high risk that the fields will become overgrown with reeds and other weeds and all crops will be lost. Then there will be no harvest, and the state order will be under threat."¹⁰⁸

Farmers reported having little choice but to rely on state-supplied fertilisers, which were widely described as of poor quality and insufficient. Some farmers purchased nitrogen and phosphorus fertilisers from Uzbekistan or Russia at their own expense to maintain the crops, which increased

their production costs and financial risk.¹⁰⁹ The shortage of fertilisers also led authorities to impose additional measures impacting farmers' livelihoods. In the Täze ýol agricultural association of Bayramaly district, Mary region, tenant farmers were prohibited from collecting cotton stalks for household fuel and instead required to shred them into compost to compensate for depleted soils. While the state enterprise "Türkmenobahyzmat" provided one Uzbek-made shredder, farmers were required to pay tractor drivers 50–60 manats (US\$3) per hectare and provide meals, with the farmers' association contributing only diesel fuel. To meet basic household needs, farmers then had to purchase cotton stalks themselves, paying 900–1,000 manats (US\$46 - US\$51) per tractor trailer, and gather and load the material independently.¹¹⁰

Similar practices were reported in Sayat, Charjev, Farap, and Danew districts of Lebap region, where farmers' associations demanded that tenant farmers hand over the cotton stalks after the harvest. For farmers, stalks are a critical post-harvest resource which they use as livestock feed or they sell to offset production costs. As one tenant from Sayat district explained, "We feed the stalks to our animals or sell them at the local market to partially cover the year's heavy expenses. Taking the stalks is a direct blow to our financial situation."¹¹¹ Several farmers said that significant quantities of cotton stalks were diverted to private livestock farms linked to local officials. A farmer from Charjev district stated, "Officials have huge herds of livestock. They sell meat to neighboring countries at high prices. Our stalks become feed for their animals, while we feed ours with spoiled bread or expensive feed." Fear of retaliation limited farmers' ability to challenge these practices. Although farmers were not provided with sufficient and good quality inputs, the state did not re-calculate the imposed production quotas to reflect the poor soil quality, lack of water, or insufficient fertilizers and other inputs.¹¹²

CHALLENGES ACCESSING AGRICULTURAL MACHINERY AND AGROTECHNOLOGY

Similar to previous years, tenant farmers reported limited access to machinery and agrotechnology, which impacted their ability to prepare the soil for sowing cotton seeds. While at a government meeting (January, 13, 2025), the responsible officials reported to President Serdar Berdimuhamedow that ploughing, harrowing, and ridge formation were "continuing as planned" on the ground, farmers said these activities had not begun due to a lack of functioning machinery. Equipment managed by the state enterprise "Obahyzmat" was described as outdated, frequently broken, and selectively deployed, often prioritised for fields belonging to association leaders, district hakims, prosecutors, and other influential figures. Farmers in Mary and Ahal regions stated that by early March they had received neither equipment nor agrochemicals, despite the agronomic requirement to prepare cotton fields by March 15, 2025 to prevent weeds and pests.¹¹³

Although authorities maintain that sufficient harvesting machinery exists on paper, farmers reported a de facto shortage caused by selective allocation. Monitoring data suggests that, compared to the 2023–2024 seasons, the cases of officials and affluent individuals openly using their connections to secure machinery, irrigation water, labor, and free or subsidised inputs have increased, reflecting a growing sense of impunity and increased openness by farmers to speak about these issues to the monitors.¹¹⁴

During the harvest, small tenant farmers in Turkmengala, Yoloten, and Garagum districts in Mary region reported waiting 10–14 days or longer for combine harvesters while cotton over-ripened and fell. Meanwhile, privileged landholders controlling 50 hectares or more received machinery, fertilisers, irrigation water, and labor first, including public-sector employees that had been mobilised by public authorities to pick cotton.¹¹⁵ As one tenant from Yoloten stated, "We repeatedly appealed to the chief agronomist, the head of the farmers' association, and complained to the hakimlik, but everyone is indifferent to our problems. These managers solve only their personal issues and pursue their own interests, which is why the combine harvesters go first to the fields of influential and wealthy people."¹¹⁶



Large landholders often have political ties and are privileged over smallhold farmers. They have increased access to machinery and irrigation water. Most cotton in Turkmenistan is produced by smallhold farmers. © Turkmen.News

Farmers reported cases where combine operators left fields mid-harvest "on a phone call from their boss or for money," forcing villagers, sometimes "together with their children," to block machinery to complete the harvesting. Such disruptions in the harvest impacted farmers' incomes because cotton delivered before October 15 is classified as first grade and paid at a higher rate.¹¹⁷

Even when machinery was available, financial and technical barriers persisted. When farmers deliver cotton to state procurement points, their cotton is weighed and recorded, and farmers receive a receipt confirming the quantity delivered. Using this receipt, farmers can access bank credit or advance payments at a state bank, typically Halkbank, to pay cotton pickers and other labor costs during the harvest. However, in Chokhbetde gengeshlik of Halach district, Lebap region, payments for combine-harvested cotton were first transferred to Türkmenobahyzmat and distributed to farmers only at the end of the season, creating cash-flow shortages for farmers who must pay pickers every 10 days. Technical deficiencies also caused losses. One farmer said, "Because the combines are poorly adjusted, up to 10% - 15% of the cotton spills onto the ground. And then all of this has to be picked by hand." Because the fields are not planted with enough space between the cotton rows for machines to fit, the machines also crushed cotton bolls that were still on the bushes.¹¹⁸

Shortages of basic equipment further disrupted field preparation. In Garavekil and Yaryk Gokche agricultural associations of Babadayhan district, Ahal region, farmers did not receive tractors for ploughing or furrow cutting. Türkmenobahyzmat, which is the state enterprise responsible for maintaining, repairing, and preparing agricultural machinery and equipment, cited a lack of spare parts for MTZ-80 tractors and insufficient functioning machines, while complaints were redirected to local authorities. "The district hyakim is responsible for the lack of water and

equipment; please contact him," the archyn of Garavekil told farmers.¹¹⁹ Turkmenobahyzmat mainly uses Belarusian-made tractors but the Ministry of Agriculture has failed to ensure a stable supply of machinery and spare parts, leaving many tractors idle for years. Despite these systemic failures, tenant farmers were forced to cover repair and spare-part costs themselves to avoid crop losses and contract penalties, a situation officials knowingly exploit.¹²⁰

Abusive conduct by officials

This case documented by Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights illustrates how corruption, in combination with a lack of rule of law, absence of independent grievance mechanisms, and no means for farmers to exercise agency and improve their conditions make smallhold farmers extremely vulnerable to arbitrary dispossession and retaliation for challenging abusive practices. Rozygul Mamekova is a farmer with two children with disabilities in the village of Bai, Sayat district, Lebap region. The family relies on a two-hectare cotton lease as their only means of survival. In 2025, the head of the local agricultural association sought to confiscate her land and transfer it to an Ashgabat-based businesswoman for a 50,000 manat (US\$2,564) bribe. Officials withheld irrigation water, machinery, and fertilisers, to make it impossible for the farmer to meet the state cotton quota. Instead of 35 centners per hectare, she delivered only 13, which was then used as grounds to have her lease terminated. When Mamekova appealed to the district authorities, Deputy Hakim openly defended the practice, admitting that officials are required to pay monthly bribes of up to 200,000 manats (US\$10,256) to their superiors.¹²¹ Mamekova traveled three times to Ashgabat to reach the Presidential Administration, but was intercepted by police and sent home each time. The Halach district court ruled that the dispute should be resolved by the same agricultural manager who perpetrated the abuse. When Mamekova rejected a proposal to divide her land with the other claimant, her lease was not renewed and winter wheat was planted on the plot. Despite an intervention by a Supreme Court representative, who reviewed the farmer's case and acknowledged there is compelling evidence for a ruling in her favor, the lower court upheld its decision.¹²²

Farmers' Precarious Financial Situation

Economic pressure on tenant farmers continued during the 2025 cotton harvest. In some cases, farmers incurred losses because of arbitrary deductions at state collection points. Farmers in Mary region reported that officials arbitrarily reduced the recorded weight of the raw cotton they delivered by 90–160 kilograms per ton, claiming reasons related to moisture or impurities while failing to conduct any tests to prove their claims. Turkmen.News obtained access to a video recording of a heated dispute between a farmer and a weigher after the latter recorded the cotton delivered at 9% deductions. The farmer was visibly distressed. He said he had collected the cotton with "his blood and sweat" and that this deduction was unfair toward his hard work. However, the farmer had no choice but to accept the loss due to the absence of effective complaint mechanisms and fear of losing his land.¹²³



Farmers deliver their harvested cotton to state-owned gins or collection points, where the cotton is weighed, tested for quality, and evaluated for trash and moisture content to determine the price farmers will receive. This system is not transparent, fostering corruption. © Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (top) and Turkmen.News (bottom)

As in previous years, cotton cultivation in 2025 placed tenant farmers under significant financial strain. Although the state formally provides production inputs, farmers must pay for these services in advance by cheque and cannot negotiate prices or refuse charges, even when inputs are delayed, partially delivered, or not provided. At the end of the season, these payments are automatically deducted from the payments farmers receive from the state for their cotton. While official purchase prices for medium-staple cotton increased in 2024 to 4,550–5,000 manats (US\$233.3 - US\$256.4) per ton, many farmers reported receiving at the end of the season only 2,400–2,500 manats (US\$123 - US\$128), as half or more of the payment had been withheld for seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, machinery, irrigation water, and other services supplied by state-controlled entities.¹²⁴

Example of a cotton farmer's income: mandatory deductions make up over 94% of their yearly income

The income statement provided to Turkmen.News by a farmer in Mary region for the 2025 cotton harvest demonstrates the economic hardships that farmers are facing. This tenant farmer leased seven hectares of land, with an imposed production quota of almost 17 tons (16,800 kg) of cotton. If the farmer could fulfill the quota, they would earn 84,000 manats (US\$4,308). However, at the end of the harvest, the farmer was able to produce only less than three tons, for which they were paid 13,695 manats (US\$702) by the state. After mandatory deductions for inputs and other services, their income became 796,81 manats (US\$41) for the 2025 season. In practice, over 94% of the farmer's earnings were absorbed through compulsory charges formally attributed to cotton production.¹²⁵

A Radio Azatlyk article published in September 2025 describes similar hardships for farmers in Ahal region. According to testimony by a farmer, "As every year, this year too we face great difficulties managing our leased land. Our main problem is lack of cash. Every year, when it is time to harvest cotton, we are left without money." The fact that the cotton harvest coincides with the start of the school year makes it particularly challenging for farmers, as they need cash to purchase school supplies and clothing for their children. The farmer added, "Sending children to school and providing them with supplies and clothes is already a big expense." Farmers described official assurances as hollow: "These words are only for broadcasts, not to ease farmers' lives." They complained that despite paying for many inputs out-of-pocket, they are still charged for state supplies after the harvest: "Even after we pay for machinery, fertilizers and water ourselves, at the end extra money is deducted from our income 'for fertilizer, water and machinery services.'" Farmers interviewed concluded that cotton growing is unprofitable because ordinary tenant farmers are pressured by cash shortages, bribery, unfair deductions, and labor constraints, and are unable to speak out against entrenched corruption.¹²⁶

Another Radio Azatlyk article published in November 2025 describes similar difficulties faced by cotton farmers in Balkan region. One farmer, who together with four other farmers leased a total of 10 hectares of land, shared: "The mandatory fees are high. From 10 hectares of land we delivered 18 centners (1.8 tons) of cotton per hectare of land and received an income of 55 thousand manats (US\$2,820). However, if we consider the expenses we incurred from our own account for thinning, three times of weeding, and irrigation, we have around 20 thousand manats

(US\$1,026) of profit left," said the farmer. This is the amount the five households will need to divide between them.¹²⁷

Farmers also faced challenges in accessing the money they were paid for their cotton. Farmers receive payments into their bank accounts, but faced issues cashing it out. Turkmenistan still lacks widespread cashless payment systems, while farmers need cash on hand to pay for their daily household expenses. ATMs in the districts of Balkan region did not have enough cash and the commercial terminals that handle non-cash payments did not work. A farmer quoted in the Radio Azatlyk article said that when he contacted local bank officials for support, he was told: "We are not even transferring salaries to public sector employees. We are making them wait so that farmers can receive money for their cotton. Cash will be available soon. Prosecutors are currently collecting payments from farmers who grew cotton and ended up in debt. If we don't add money to the treasury, how can we deposit money into ATMs?"¹²⁸ Another farmer said that "In recent years, cashing out money has become even more difficult than growing cotton."¹²⁹

Difficulty earning a living income from growing cotton forces many tenant farmers to leave Turkmenistan and work as labor migrants abroad. One of the farmers interviewed by Turkmen.News said that he found work in Belarus, in the construction sector, and he earns US\$350-US\$400 per month. He said that his monthly expenses total US\$200, and he is able to send to his family an estimated US\$150-US\$200 every month. He said this is more than what he was earning from growing cotton during an entire season. He said there are many farmers who are seeking work abroad.¹³⁰ Farmers' pension is also not enough to maintain their livelihoods. According to an agricultural expert in Turkmenistan, after having worked in 50°C (122 F) for 40 years, tenant farmers are given a pension of 400 manats (US\$20.5) a month, which is not sufficient to meet their needs.¹³¹



Corruption and Opportunities for Enrichment

“There is no transparency in the relations between tenant farmers and state institutions. All decisions are made based on specific instructions from local governors.”

An agricultural observer in Lebap region¹³²

The forced labor system is rife with corruption, providing opportunities for various actors to extort money from employees, farmers, or institutions, and embezzle money from payments collected for replacement workers and other harvest expenses. The ample opportunities for personal enrichment provided by the forced labor system creates disincentives for reform or resistance, with most of the costs placed on farmers, public sector employees, and others who can least afford it. Below are several such examples showcasing how systemic corruption, abuse of power and falsification of agricultural data facilitate the forced labor system in the annual cotton harvest in Turkmenistan.

Corruption: An Enabling Factor of the Forced Labor System

An investigation by Turkmen.News (published in 2025) into the Bayramaly district education department in Mary region reveals a deeply entrenched corruption system that contributes to forced labor in the cotton harvest. The sector operates through a hierarchical chain of officials, from district education authorities to inspectors, school administrators, and human-resources staff. Inspections are used to identify alleged violations. School directors then collect money from teachers to pay off inspectors, who in turn bribe higher authorities and law-enforcement bodies that shield the system from scrutiny. This case shows how officials generate revenue from the public education system, while teachers bear the financial burden.¹³³

Within this system, teachers were required to pay 40 manats (US\$2) for each teaching hour above 24 hours per week, while job-seekers paid an “entry fee” of around US\$800 to secure employment. In one case, officials collected approximately US\$30,000 by hiring 100 teachers on one-year contracts for US\$300 each.¹³⁴ These payments place a heavy burden on teachers whose average monthly salary is about 2,000 manats (US\$102).¹³⁵

This extortion system enables forced labor in the harvest. Beginning in August, each of the Bayramaly district’s 51 schools was required to send seven teachers every Sunday to pick cotton or pay 20 manats (US\$1) for a replacement, generating up to 7,140 manats (US\$366) weekly. Teachers were also mobilised to sow wheat in October and were charged for transportation, with more than 40,000 manats (US\$2,051) collected in a single day for buses to Sakarchaga district. Under the weight of constant levies and forced mobilisation, educators increasingly resign, and around ten of the district’s 51 schools reportedly remain without a director.¹³⁶

Extortion of state employees to pay for replacement pickers provides an enrichment opportunity for heads of public institutions. For example, public sector workers in education, healthcare, and banking sectors in Ahal region were required to finance overnight replacement pickers. As one state employee explained, “These workers work on 15-day shifts. For each 15-day shift, an employee must pay 600 manats (US\$30.8) from their salary, and on top of that they must

continue their regular job.”¹³⁷ After also paying for daily pickers in August, employees had spent up to a quarter of their monthly salary for two consecutive months, describing the practice as an illegal “cotton tax.”¹³⁸ According to another employee, “The workers hired and paid for by budget employees pick cotton in the fields of hakims, officials, and village leaders. No hired workers are taken to farmers’ contracted plots.” She also added that “Managers take 600 manats (US\$30.8) from us for a worker who picks cotton for 15 days... but the workers say they are only paid 25 manats (US\$1.3) a day. That means managers pocket 225 manats (US\$11.5) from each employee’s payment.” Employees said this practice “thicken[s] the pockets of their managers.”¹³⁹

Falsification of Harvest Data

Systemic corruption, falsification of agricultural statistics, and abuse of power continue to shape cotton production in Turkmenistan, undermining the rights, livelihoods, and economic security of tenant farmers. An investigative article by Turkmen.News (published in November 2025) traces the roots of this system to long-standing corrupt governance practices within the agro-industrial sector. It identifies Esenmyrat Orazgeldyev, former Minister of Agriculture, regional hakim, and later Deputy Prime Minister overseeing agriculture in Dashoguz region, as a central figure who institutionalised inflated harvest reporting. Beginning in the mid-2000s, while supervising both grain and cotton production, Orazgeldyev promoted a model in which reported production growth concealed declining soil quality, chronic water shortages, and widespread mismanagement.¹⁴⁰

In practice, falsified reporting was accompanied by delayed sowing, selective deployment of machinery, diversion of inputs to officials’ private plots, and continued reliance on forced labor. Monitoring sources describe staged “model fields” prepared for official visits, including instructions to tie cotton bolls to plants or paint dried vegetation green to simulate rich yields. State resources and unpaid labor were channelled toward maintaining appearances rather than improving irrigation, soil quality, or input distribution. By 2023, failures in water management culminated in a breach of the Garagum Canal, wasting more than 100 million cubic metres of freshwater. Although official reporting continued to claim full or over-fulfilment of state plans, sources indicate that nationwide cotton and wheat deliveries reach only around 70% of targets, with performance in Dashoguz region averaging about 75%.¹⁴¹

Corrupt practices also take place within agricultural service delivery, creating machinery shortages for farmers. The former head of Turkmenobahyzmat, which is the state entity in charge of agricultural machinery and technical services, in Shabat district, Dashoguz region, diverted functioning equipment to officials’ private fields and looted an entire supply base, selling spare parts and equipment intended for the region’s agricultural warehouse. Following his appointment as head of the agricultural department at the district hyakimlik, he reportedly demanded bribes from farmers for supplying fertilisers. Sources cited by Turkmen.News indicated that access to machinery and services depended on informal payments, leaving farmers facing delayed fieldwork, reduced harvests, and increased risk of failing to meet state cotton quotas. This pattern illustrates how unequal access to agricultural machinery shifts production risks onto tenant farmers while enabling connected actors to meet state targets under more favourable conditions.¹⁴²

At the farm level, falsification practices expose farmers to additional financial risks. In the Gulistan agricultural association in Mary region, tenant farmers organised their own labor brigades to complete weeding and thinning on schedule, covering approximately 1.5 hectares per day without external assistance. Despite this, the association’s director and brigadier reportedly visited households requesting signatures on fictitious reports claiming that teachers,



Forced Labor Turkmen Cotton in Global Supply Chains

doctors, and nursery staff carried out the work. This administrative fraud allows them to demonstrate “full resource utilization” to the regional hakims, shielding themselves from blame if harvest targets are missed. Regional governors have to ensure cotton quotas are met. They in turn pass responsibility for these quotas down the chain of command to district and local levels, with heads of public institutions having to report on the number of people sent to the fields. The farmers, however, faced significant financial risk as they feared the state would eventually deduct “labor costs” from their earnings for this phantom workforce. This case underscores the tension between officials, who are preoccupied with falsifying metrics to protect themselves from punishment for not meeting harvest production plans, and farmers, who are seeking collective solutions to minimize their expenses.¹⁴³

While official statistics present stable or fulfilled targets, farmers reported wasted harvests due to labor shortages, delayed machinery, and cotton falling from plants before collection. Mass mobilisation of public sector workers and the collection of funds for replacement pickers did not always translate into actual labor in the fields, reflecting both administrative inefficiency and misuse of funds. Combined with labor shortages driven by migration, these dynamics left many farmers unable to harvest on time while still facing full contractual obligations.

Finally, farmers reported they often do not have access to their contracts. Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights reported that when tenant farmers sign land lease agreements (including in January 2025) with the agricultural association in their district, both copies of the contract remain with the association. A copy of a contract in Mary region obtained by Turkmen Initiative shows the amount of cotton that farmers are required to deliver and the harvesting schedule. In return, the association is responsible for providing irrigation and carrying out agricultural maintenance on time. In practice, however, farmers report that sufficient water, fertilizer, and equipment are rarely delivered and almost never on schedule. The contract would formally allow farmers to seek legal remedy for the farmer associations failing to meet their contractual obligations. However, farmers are unaware of this right. The contract also obliges tenant farmers to produce silk cocoons.¹⁴⁴ Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights reported on forced labor practices in the production of silk cocoons, including exploitation of farmers and extortion of state employees.¹⁴⁵

Turkmenistan is the 14th largest cotton producer in the world and has a vertically integrated cotton industry.¹⁴⁶ Brands and retailers face the risk of cotton made with state-imposed forced labor in Turkmenistan entering their cotton supply chains at all stages of production. Suppliers in third countries, in particular Türkiye and Pakistan, but also EU member countries including Portugal and Italy, among others, use cotton, yarn, and fabric originating in Turkmenistan.

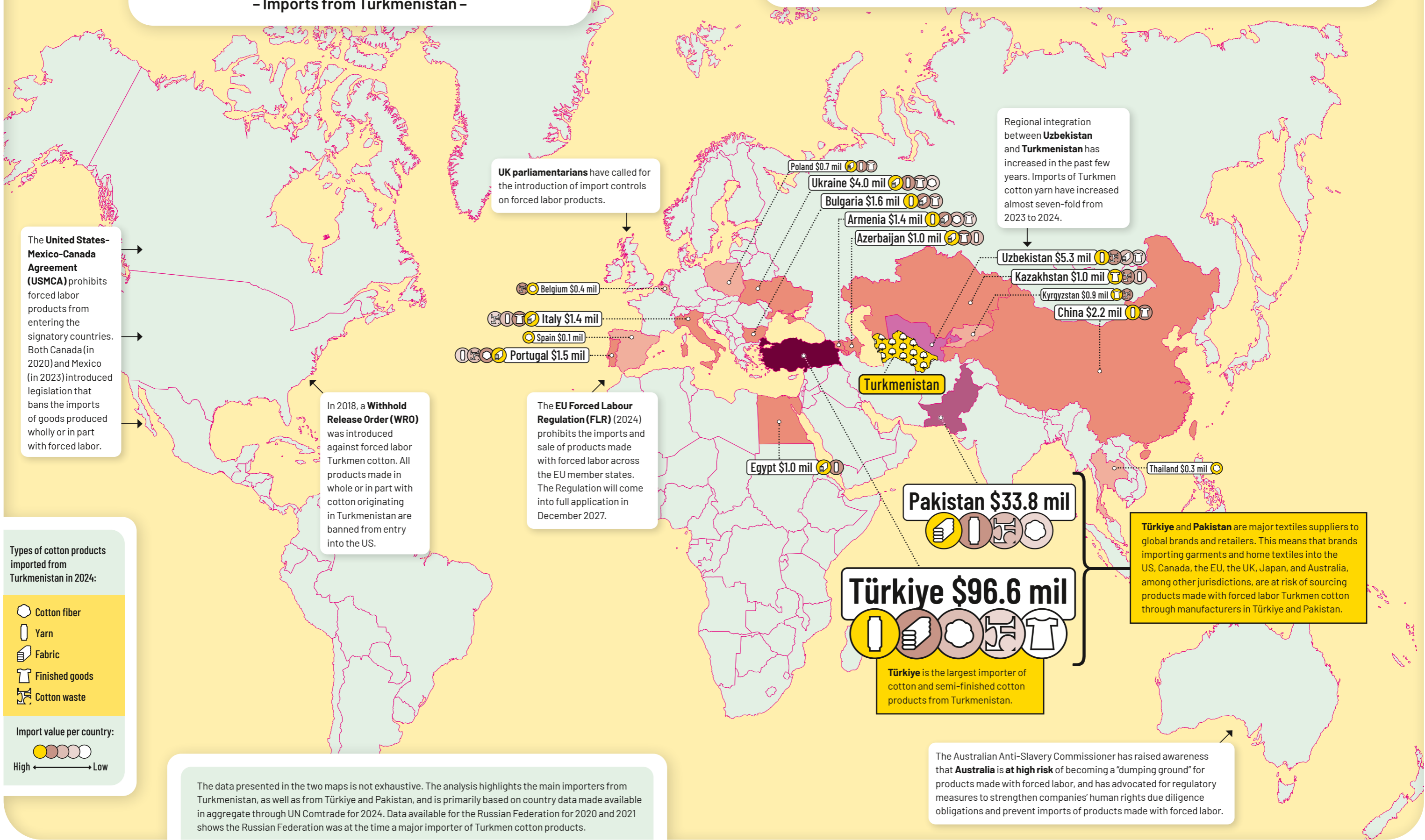
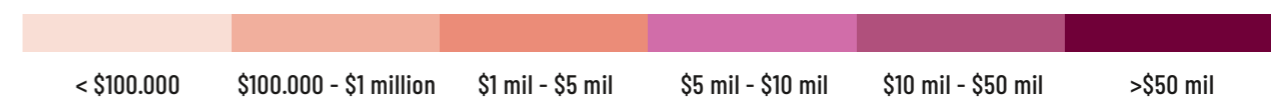
Because of widespread and systematic state-imposed forced labor in the annual cotton harvest in Turkmenistan, it is a practical impossibility for brands and retailers to conduct any credible human rights due diligence on the ground to prevent or remedy forced labor. For this reason, to meet their requirements to responsible business conduct under the OECD Guidelines¹⁴⁷ and UN Guiding Principles,¹⁴⁸ and comply with laws governing imports and human rights due diligence in supply chains, companies must map out their entire textile supply chains, down to the raw material level, and eliminate all cotton originating in Turkmenistan.¹⁴⁹

The Cotton Campaign Coalition has conducted supply chain research into specific trade flows through which forced labor Turkmen cotton and cotton products enter global supply chains and markets.¹⁵⁰ Highlights of this research are provided in the following two maps.

How Forced Labor Turkmen Cotton Enters Global Markets (1/2)

- Imports from Turkmenistan -

Values of cotton products imported from Turkmenistan in 2024, total of products per country.



The **United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA)** prohibits forced labor products from entering the signatory countries. Both Canada (in 2020) and Mexico (in 2023) introduced legislation that bans the imports of goods produced wholly or in part with forced labor.

In 2018, a **Withhold Release Order (WRO)** was introduced against forced labor Turkmen cotton. All products made in whole or in part with cotton originating in Turkmenistan are banned from entry into the US.

UK parliamentarians have called for the introduction of import controls on forced labor products.

The **EU Forced Labour Regulation (FLR)** (2024) prohibits the imports and sale of products made with forced labor across the EU member states. The Regulation will come into full application in December 2027.

Regional integration between **Uzbekistan** and **Turkmenistan** has increased in the past few years. Imports of Turkmen cotton yarn have increased almost seven-fold from 2023 to 2024.

Türkiye and **Pakistan** are major textiles suppliers to global brands and retailers. This means that brands importing garments and home textiles into the US, Canada, the EU, the UK, Japan, and Australia, among other jurisdictions, are at risk of sourcing products made with forced labor Turkmen cotton through manufacturers in Türkiye and Pakistan.

Türkiye is the largest importer of cotton and semi-finished cotton products from Turkmenistan.

The Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner has raised awareness that **Australia** is at high risk of becoming a "dumping ground" for products made with forced labor, and has advocated for regulatory measures to strengthen companies' human rights due diligence obligations and prevent imports of products made with forced labor.

Types of cotton products imported from Turkmenistan in 2024:

- Cotton fiber
- Yarn
- Fabric
- Finished goods
- Cotton waste

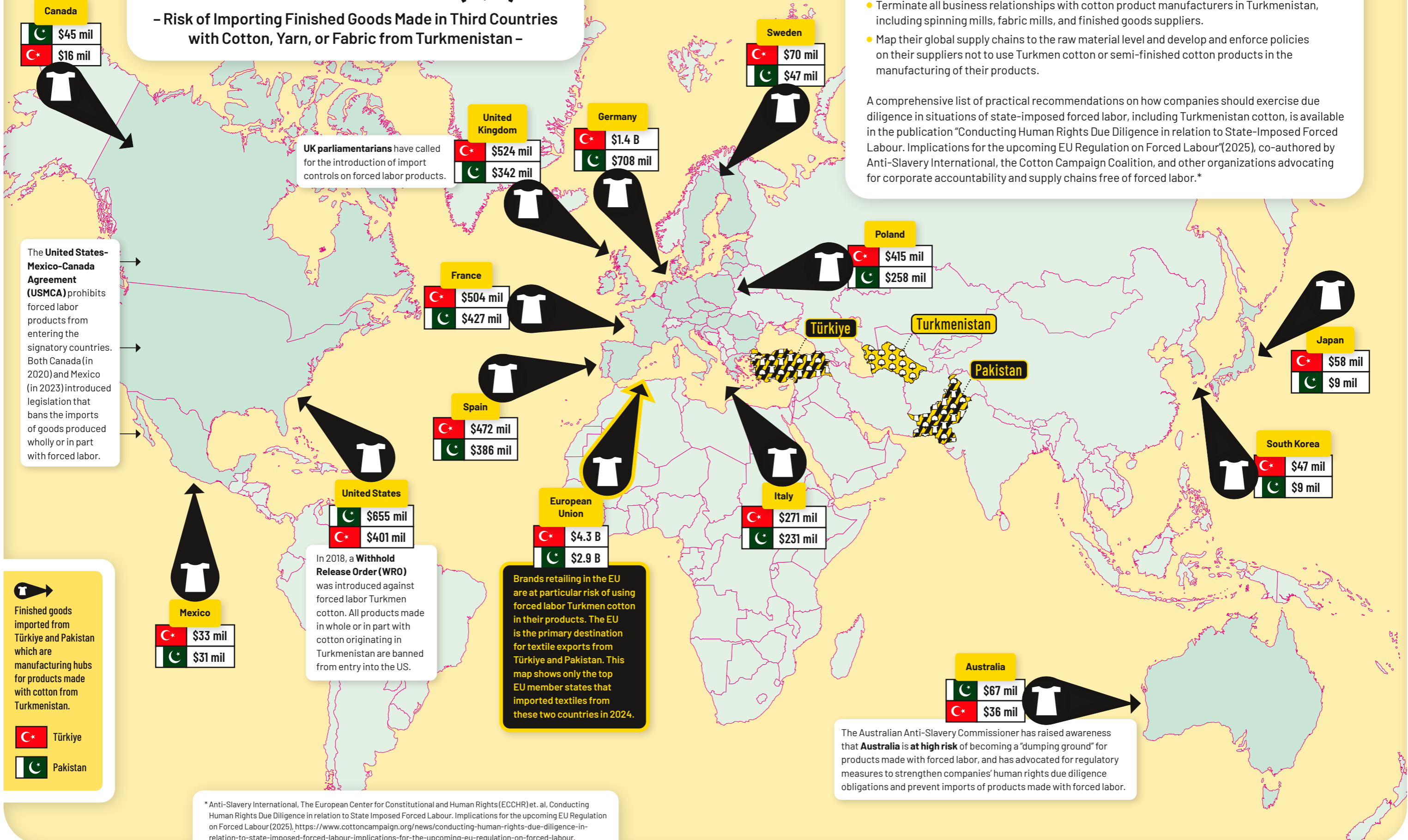
Import value per country:

High ← → Low

The data presented in the two maps is not exhaustive. The analysis highlights the main importers from Turkmenistan, as well as from Türkiye and Pakistan, and is primarily based on country data made available in aggregate through UN Comtrade for 2024. Data available for the Russian Federation for 2020 and 2021 shows the Russian Federation was at the time a major importer of Turkmen cotton products.

How Forced Labor Turkmen Cotton Enters Global Markets (2/2)

- Risk of Importing Finished Goods Made in Third Countries with Cotton, Yarn, or Fabric from Turkmenistan -



To eliminate Turkmen cotton from their supply chains and ensure compliance with legislation banning the imports of products made in whole or in part with forced labor—including the **EU Forced Labour Regulation, which will come into full application in December 2027**—all companies should:

- Terminate all business relationships with cotton product manufacturers in Turkmenistan, including spinning mills, fabric mills, and finished goods suppliers.
- Map their global supply chains to the raw material level and develop and enforce policies on their suppliers not to use Turkmen cotton or semi-finished cotton products in the manufacturing of their products.

A comprehensive list of practical recommendations on how companies should exercise due diligence in situations of state-imposed forced labor, including Turkmenistan cotton, is available in the publication "Conducting Human Rights Due Diligence in relation to State-Imposed Forced Labour. Implications for the upcoming EU Regulation on Forced Labour" (2025), co-authored by Anti-Slavery International, the Cotton Campaign Coalition, and other organizations advocating for corporate accountability and supply chains free of forced labor.*

The **United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA)** prohibits forced labor products from entering the signatory countries. Both Canada (in 2020) and Mexico (in 2023) introduced legislation that bans the imports of goods produced wholly or in part with forced labor.

UK parliamentarians have called for the introduction of import controls on forced labor products.

In 2018, a **Withhold Release Order (WRO)** was introduced against forced labor Turkmen cotton. All products made in whole or in part with cotton originating in Turkmenistan are banned from entry into the US.

Brands retailing in the EU are at particular risk of using forced labor Turkmen cotton in their products. The EU is the primary destination for textile exports from Türkiye and Pakistan. This map shows only the top EU member states that imported textiles from these two countries in 2024.

The Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner has raised awareness that **Australia is at high risk** of becoming a "dumping ground" for products made with forced labor, and has advocated for regulatory measures to strengthen companies' human rights due diligence obligations and prevent imports of products made with forced labor.

* Anti-Slavery International, The European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) et. al, Conducting Human Rights Due Diligence in relation to State Imposed Forced Labour. Implications for the upcoming EU Regulation on Forced Labour (2025), https://www.cottoncampaign.org/news/conducting-human-rights-due-diligence-in-relation-to-state-imposed-forced-labour-implications-for-the-upcoming-eu-regulation-on-forced-labour_

Türkiye is a manufacturing hub for products made with forced labor cotton from Turkmenistan. Trade data released annually between 2020-2024 by UN Comtrade shows that Türkiye is the primary importer of cotton and semi-finished cotton goods from Turkmenistan.

- In 2024, Türkiye imported from Turkmenistan: US\$62.1 million worth of yarn, US\$18.9 million worth of fabric, and US\$9.8 million worth of cotton fiber. Türkiye also imported US\$5.7 million worth of cotton waste from Turkmenistan. Cotton waste can be used in the production of medical supplies or recycled into cotton fabric.¹⁵¹

Pakistan is another major producer of garments and textiles using cotton from Turkmenistan.

- In 2024, Pakistan imported from Turkmenistan: US\$17.7 million worth of fabric, US\$11.2 million worth of yarn, US\$3.6 million worth of cotton waste, and US\$1.2 million worth of cotton fiber.

Bulgaria, Portugal, Italy, and Poland are key European importers of cotton semi-finished goods from Turkmenistan. Manufacturers in these countries use these products for the production of finished goods. In 2024:

- Bulgaria was by far the largest importer into the EU of cotton yarn from Turkmenistan, buying US\$1.2 million worth of yarn.
- Italy was the largest importer into the EU of cotton fabric from Turkmenistan (US\$1.1 million), followed by Portugal (US\$0.8 million), and Poland (US\$0.7 million).

Italy has also been a key European importer of cotton finished goods—primarily bed and kitchen linen— from Turkmenistan. Data made available in UN Comtrade shows that imports of Turkmen finished goods decreased significantly in 2024 (US\$0.1 million) from 2023 (US\$0.7 million). This seems to be a positive development, however more needs to be done by brands, retailers, and authorities to ensure no products made with cotton from Turkmenistan are imported into Italy, in accordance with the EU Forced Labor Regulation, which will unfold from 2027.

Uzbekistan is a major importer of cotton semi-finished products from Turkmenistan. With regional integration between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan increasing in recent years, Uzbekistan imported US\$4.7 million worth of Turkmen yarn in 2024, almost a seven-fold increase from 2023. Imports of products made in whole or in part with forced labor are banned across increasingly more jurisdictions in the Global North, as described in the section below. A proliferation of new technology, from sourcing relationship mapping to isotope tracing, means that full supply chain traceability can be achieved. It also means that countries like Uzbekistan, where the government and industry have made significant investments to integrate production in the hope of increasing exports of finished products to markets like the US or the EU, are undermining their own efforts if they continue using cotton yarn and other semi-finished products from Turkmenistan in the production of goods.

It is not only morally, but also legally imperative to eliminate forced labor Turkmen cotton from global supply chains. An increasing number of countries are adopting stronger laws to eliminate forced labor from supply chains. In recent years, jurisdictions such as France¹⁵², Germany¹⁵³, Norway¹⁵⁴, the EU¹⁵⁵, Thailand¹⁵⁶, South Korea¹⁵⁷ and New Zealand¹⁵⁸ have debated or adopted laws and policies that require companies to conduct human rights and environmental due diligence in their value chains. Meanwhile, the US, Canada, Mexico and the EU have enacted laws¹⁵⁹ banning imports of products made with forced labor from their markets, and various others are resolved to enact similar laws in the near future under trade agreement obligations.

- In the US, a Withhold Release Order (WRO) against Turkmen cotton has been in effect since 2018.¹⁶⁰
- The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) prohibits forced labor products from entering the signatory countries.¹⁶¹ In 2020, Canada introduced legislation that bans imports of goods manufactured wholly or in part by forced labor.¹⁶² Similarly, in 2023, Mexico, introduced regulation that prohibits the importation of goods produced wholly or in part with forced labor.¹⁶³
- In the US, compliance with the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) is an opportunity for companies to eliminate Turkmen cotton from supply chains. Companies retailing in the US have an obligation to comply with the UFLPA,¹⁶⁴ which requires them to map their supply chains to the raw material level and exclude all goods made in whole or in part with the use of forced labor of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Brands and retailers alike should also use this opportunity to trace and eliminate Turkmen cotton from their products, at all stages of production.
- In November 2024, the EU adopted the EU Forced Labour Regulation, which bans the import, export and internal sale of goods made in whole or in part with forced labor.¹⁶⁵ The Regulation will come into full application in December 2027. The Regulation directs competent authorities to prioritise investigations in consideration of the scale and severity of the alleged harm, including whether state-imposed forced labor could be a concern. The risk database, required by the Regulation, will include sectors and areas with evidence of state-imposed forced labor. The database of forced labor risks will serve as a key source of information for authorities and economic operators.
- In the UK, there are growing cross-party calls for the introduction of import controls on forced labor products. This includes a recommendation from the UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee to focus such measures to stop imports of forced labor Turkmen cotton into the UK.¹⁶⁶ This also includes the 2025 report from the Joint Committee on Human Rights which includes a whole section on import bans and their effectiveness on state-imposed forced labor,¹⁶⁷ and the Business and Trade Committee's 2025 report calling for the UK government to consider import bans.¹⁶⁸ Policy commitments to address forced labor in supply chains are possibly on the horizon as an expected result of the Department for Business and Trade's responsible business conduct review, which considers import bans and due diligence laws as possible effective tools.¹⁶⁹
- In Australia, the Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner has raised awareness that Australia is at high risk of becoming a "dumping ground" for products made with forced labor.¹⁷⁰ In the Strategic Plan for 2025 - 2028, the Commissioner has committed to pursue regulatory measures to effectively prevent the importation of goods made with forced labor.¹⁷¹ Australia completed a review of its Modern Slavery Act in 2023, which found that the Act failed to drive meaningful, mandatory action to eliminate modern slavery from global supply chains, leading to recommendations for tighter compliance, including civil penalties, mandatory human rights due diligence, and a lower reporting threshold.¹⁷²



Recommendations

By investing in Turkmenistan's textile industry, European and other machine manufacturers are facilitating forced labor Turkmen cotton to enter global markets.

Machinery and equipment supplied to spinning mills, fabric mills, sewing units and other manufacturing facilities in the Turkmen textile industry facilitate the production of forced labor Turkmen cotton into (semi-) finished goods. Companies contributing to the vertical integration of production in Turkmenistan benefit from the forced labor system and enable Turkmen cotton to enter global markets. These companies, which include Italian and German machine manufacturers¹⁷³, are profiting from the forced labor of Turkmen workers. The Association of Italian Textile Machinery Manufacturers (ACIMIT) reported that in 2023 alone, its members sold €13 million worth of textile machinery to Turkmen entities.¹⁷⁴ To comply with responsible business conduct guidelines and regulations, all these companies should terminate their direct and indirect business relationships with Turkmenistan's textile industry.

The **government of Turkmenistan** should take urgent action to end the practice of state-imposed forced labor in the cotton sector.

Specifically, the government should:

- Enforce national laws that prohibit the use of forced and child labor in alignment with ILO conventions;
- Issue public, high-level policy statements condemning forced labor and explicitly prohibit the use of coercion to mobilize anyone to work, or to hire pickers, pay for replacement pickers or otherwise finance the picking of cotton—such as via a presidential decree or instruction;
- Take action to hold officials accountable for mobilizing and extorting citizens and provide remedy for those affected;
- Fully cooperate with and implement recommendations from UN treaty bodies, UN Special Procedures, and ILO Supervisory Mechanisms, including recommendations from the ILO Committee on the Application of Standards (CAS)¹⁷⁵, the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations¹⁷⁶, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child¹⁷⁷ and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women¹⁷⁸;
- Ensure that independent labor monitors, independent trade unions, journalists, and human rights defenders can operate freely to document and report labor conditions without fear of reprisal;
- Publish the 2025-2026 Roadmap of Cooperation Activities between the ILO and the government of Turkmenistan,¹⁷⁹ making the government's commitments to begin addressing forced labor available to the public.

The government of Turkmenistan should reinforce the preliminary steps taken in the 2023 and 2024 cotton harvests toward addressing the use of state-imposed forced labor of cotton pickers, and expand these preliminary measures through reforms that address root causes, empower workers and farmers, and allow independent monitoring and reporting. The government should protect civic freedoms and ensure that forced labor reforms involve the broader enabling of fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of association. In this pursuit and beyond, the government should meaningfully involve international independent social partners in the reform process. This is in line with the 2024 Conclusions of the ILO CAS, which called on the government of Turkmenistan to engage with independent social partners as a critical element to ensuring the full application of the ILO Convention No.105 on the Abolition of Forced Labour.

The government should also publicly report on concrete measures taken and tangible results achieved to eliminate state-imposed forced labour and child labor, including on the specific goals committed to in the framework of the Roadmaps of Cooperation between the ILO and the government of Turkmenistan for 2024-2025 and 2025-2026.

The **Ombudsman of Turkmenistan** should develop a system of independent monitoring of forced labor during the cotton harvest and present the findings in the Ombudsman's annual report. The Ombudsman's office should also set up a mechanism where Turkmenistan's citizens can report instances of coercion to work in the cotton fields and receive remedy.

Foreign governments should increase pressure on the Turkmen government to eliminate forced labor by employing both a human and labor rights framework in accordance with UN and ILO conventions and standards, and a human rights due diligence framework.

Governments should reinforce with the Turkmen government, in bilateral and multilateral human rights dialogues, that forced labor must be eliminated. In particular, the US Department of State should downgrade Turkmenistan from Tier 2 Watch List to Tier 3, the lowest possible tier, in the 2026 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, for the government's ongoing use of state-imposed forced labor in the annual cotton harvest.

Governments should also support labor and human rights defenders in Turkmenistan, including by raising concerns about ill-treatment against them, meeting with labor and human rights defenders, and publicly expressing concerns when people are harassed for conducting human rights work.

Governments should also use their "voice and vote" at the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and other international finance institutions to prevent any investment that directly or indirectly contributes to Turkmenistan's forced labor cotton production system.

Domestically, governments should introduce and enforce import controls on products made (in whole or in part) or transported with forced labor, which would allow for the prohibition of products containing Turkmen cotton. Governments should also enact mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence legislation, requiring all business enterprises to conduct human rights due diligence in their value chains. Crucially, laws should recognize that in cases of systemic and widespread state-imposed forced labor, such as in the annual cotton harvest in Turkmenistan, companies are unable to conduct any credible human rights due diligence on the ground to prevent or remedy forced labor, and require disengagement at all levels of the supply chain as the only manner to ensure compliance with laws governing human rights due diligence and imports. Specifically:

- The European Union should retain the Articles of the CS3D that included the need to terminate business relationships where there is no reasonable expectation that efforts will succeed, such as in situations of state-imposed forced labor, in the transposition of the Omnibus CS3D text, despite their removals in negotiations;
- The European Union, in the development of guidelines and reviews of the Forced Labour Regulation, should allow for guidelines on ending and remediating forced labor to recognise the need for full disengagement from contexts of state-imposed forced labor, and for future amendments to enable regional/industry-wide bans in cases of state-imposed forced labor;
- Information from civil society reports should be included as a source of information in the database of guidelines and reviews of the Forced Labour Regulation;
- Several state jurisdictions, including the US, European Union, Canada, and Mexico should collaborate in enforcement actions, to share their available data and analysis;
- The US Customs and Border Protection Agency (CBP) should detain all shipments of goods containing cotton products from Turkmenistan and publish the list of detentions made and the value of the shipments detained under the WRO. It should also develop a strategy to identify and review shipments of cotton products from suppliers in third countries — including but not limited to Türkiye and Pakistan — that import cotton and semi-finished cotton goods from Turkmenistan. The onus should be on importers to show that they have no exposure to Turkmen cotton.
- CBP should work together with the office of the US Trade Representative, Canada Border Services Agency, and Employment and Social Development Canada to encourage enforcement of the labor provisions of the USMCA and ensure that products subject to the WRO over Turkmen forced labor cotton allegations are not permitted to enter Canada.

- The relevant Canadian and Mexican labor agencies and enforcement departments should publicly recognize cotton goods originating in Turkmenistan or containing Turkmen cotton as goods produced with state-imposed forced labor and introduce a country wide ban against cotton from Turkmenistan, similar to the US WRO. The Canadian and Mexican governments should also publish the list of detentions made and the value of the shipments detained and work together with US counterparts to ensure enforcement of the USMCA forced labor provisions, and that products subject to the US WRO on Turkmen forced labor cotton are prohibited from entering Canada or Mexico.

The ILO should meaningfully consult with independent international social partners, such as the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), in all stages of its monitoring work and Roadmap development and implementation in Turkmenistan. This should include the process of negotiating a new Roadmap for 2027 onwards. The 2025-2026 Roadmap for Cooperation Activities between the ILO and the government of Turkmenistan should be made publicly available. Additionally, the ILO should involve relevant international social partners into the development and implementation of monitoring methodology for future monitoring missions to Turkmenistan, and publish its findings.

Recognizing the severe restrictions on independent groups inside of Turkmenistan, the ILO should regularly consult with the Cotton Campaign and its independent Turkmen civil society partner organizations.

In its discussions with the Turkmen government, the ILO should raise concerns about the safety and access of independent monitors publicly and at the highest levels, and make clear that their ability to work unimpeded is a vital sign of the government's good faith and a requirement for ILO assistance. It should also make clear that ending state-imposed forced labor in Turkmenistan requires a broader enabling of all the Fundamental Rights at Work, including freedom of association and collective bargaining, and that other civil and political rights such as freedom of expression are critical to addressing root causes of forced labor.

Brands and retailers should prohibit the use of cotton from Turkmenistan in their products and sign the Turkmen Cotton Pledge¹⁸⁰ to demonstrate their public commitment to eliminate any Turkmen cotton from their products as long as Turkmen cotton is produced with state-imposed forced labor. They should immediately terminate all direct sourcing relationships with Turkmen suppliers, and map their supply chains to the raw material level and eliminate all cotton originating in Turkmenistan. This requires going beyond existing references to "zero tolerance of forced labor" or other similar language in supplier requirements and proactively engaging with direct suppliers, as well as the spinning and fabric mills in their supply chains.

Machine manufacturers should terminate all business relations with Turkmenistan's textile industry. They should stop the supply of machines and equipment to spinning mills, fabric mills, sewing units and other manufacturing facilities in Turkmenistan.

Annex: Glossary of Terms

Peasant Association: Association of individual smallholder farms formed on the site of former Soviet-era collective farms; these usually encompass a large area and have a centralized administration that oversees shared infrastructure and resources, including tractor machines and irrigation systems, and distributes inputs controlled by the state, such as cotton seeds, fuel, and fertilizers. Although peasant associations are intended to support tenant farmers, the administrations are appointed by the Hyakim and they must enforce national production quotas on farmers.

Hyakimlik: Regional, district, or city administration

Hyakim: Regional, district, or city head (equivalent to governor or mayor)

Manat: Turkmen currency. The official state rate is fixed at 3.5 manats for US\$1, while the black market rate is 19.5 manats for US\$1. The black market rate is used in conversions throughout the report since that is the rate used by most Turkmen citizens.

Tenant farmer: A farmer who leases agricultural land in a peasant association, often just two to five hectares; in some regions, wealthier leaseholders may control plots of 20 hectares or more.

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