



Rotarian Action
Group Against
Child Slavery



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Junghun Cho
World Bank Country Manager
(Uzbekistan, Europe & Central Asia)
1818 H Street
Washington DC
USA

Dear Mr Cho

Uzbek Country Partnership Framework & the annual Cotton Harvest

The purpose of this joint letter from the Walk Free Movement and the Rotarian Action Group against Child Slavery is to urge the World Bank to abide by its contractual obligation not to fund projects in Uzbekistan where there is evidence of forced labour and to publically denounce reprisals against Uzbek citizens reporting on the abuse. We also urge the World Bank Group, which has begun the process of preparing a new Country Partnership Framework (CPF) for Uzbekistan, to ensure that every project the World Bank undertakes in that country should include third party monitoring and measures to eliminate forced labour in the project area. This request has been prompted by further [reports of abuse](#) by the Uzbek government during the current cotton harvest.

Charges against the Uzbek Government.

The Government of Uzbekistan has been indicted by anti-slavery and human rights organizations on a regular basis concerning the general violation of human rights in Uzbekistan. However, this letter is focused solely on the reported charges relating to the collection of the cotton harvest.

The first reported charge relates to the compulsion placed on farmers to grow cotton and to deliver state determined quotas. Failure to comply with the requirements often leads to loss of the farm lease, public harassment, criminal charges and fines.

The second reported charge is the use of forced labour. Under international pressure, the Uzbek Government ended the nationwide mobilization of school children to harvest cotton in 2014, but has

taken up the slack with adult workers from a wide range of trades and professions eg teachers, university lecturers, doctors, health staff and factory workers. These workers are forced to leave their colleges and work places for weeks at a time, with no pay, but with the threat of punishment, withdrawal of necessary certificates or dismissal from work.

Large scale corruption and extortion by public officials is the third reported charge. It is understood that those who wish to avoid picking cotton can opt to pay approximately US\$200 to the local officials. Even businesses, including international businesses, are reportedly required to contribute to the harvest, either by sending workers or making compensation payments.

Government denial of the charges.

The Government frequently denies that forced labour is an official policy, claiming that the cotton pickers volunteer their services because of their loyalty to their region or country. Yet in spite of continual harassment and intimidation of those who attempt to monitor the cotton harvest and report on human rights abuses, workers' testimonies and independent media reports tell a different story.

Arrest and expulsion of international labour rights expert.

The Uzbek government is using fear, intimidation and physical violence to prevent monitors from documenting forced labour. Uzbek officials have undertaken a harsh crackdown on civil society monitors in the last several weeks, subjecting them to body cavity searches, beatings, detention, surveillance and intimidation.

In March we were shocked to hear about the manner of the arrest, the interrogation and the expulsion from Uzbekistan of Dr Andre Mrost. Dr Mrost is an international labour rights consultant, whose firm "Just Solutions Network Ltd had bid on a contract to implement a feedback mechanism which was called for under the terms of the World Bank loans. His treatment must raise serious concerns about the Uzbek Government's commitment to international human rights conventions and the feasibility of the World Bank's agricultural programmes in Uzbekistan. When he was detained last March, Dr Mrost was meeting with representatives of Ezgulki, the only human rights NGO registered with the Uzbek authorities.

As Dr Mrost has already stated "if a meeting with a registered civil-society organization to discuss ILO conventions ratified by Uzbekistan is interpreted as an illegal act deserving deportation; if the Ministry of Labour, an essential partner in ILO and World Bank programmes, leads to such an interrogation, this all raises serious questions. Is the Uzbek Government prepared to implement its recent agreements with the ILO ? How feasible are the World Bank's plans to ensure labour standards in its project areas, if the mere attempt to discuss labour standards is regarded as a deportable offense by the Government?"

World Bank's request for feedback

The World Bank has been made aware of the concerns expressed about the situation in Uzbekistan on a number of occasions. Naturally we were disappointed last February when the World Bank's Inspection Panel chose not to proceed with an investigation into a charge that the Bank's funding policy in Uzbekistan may be perpetuating forced labour in that country.

We are aware that the World Bank has initiated a new Country Partnership Framework (CPF) for Uzbekistan for the fiscal years 2016-20 and is seeking feedback and comments from local parties, both locally and internationally.

The comments of Walk Free and the Rotarian Action Group against Child Slavery (RACSRAG) are included below.

Comments of Walk Free and RACSRAG.

In our view the arrest and expulsion of Dr Mrost, as well as numerous other Uzbek human right activists, underlines the Uzbek Government's complete disregard of human rights, its unfettered exploitation of its own citizens and the critical need of the World Bank to take all necessary measures to ensure its projects do not contribute to the rights abuses which are currently endemic in the country. We would like to see the World Bank work with Uzbekistan officials to ensure all human right monitors working in their project areas are allowed to report on the cotton harvest without fear of reprisal.

Furthermore, we would like to see a withdrawal of funding until such time that the Uzbek government has taken steps to ensure that no government official or citizen acting on behalf of the government coerces anyone to pick cotton and prosecutes anyone who does.

We realize that the World Bank is like a cooperative made up of 188 member countries and that its approach to funding support in Uzbekistan is based on the principle that poverty is a violation of human rights and therefore its actions to relieve poverty will in turn improve human rights. However, we view the suspension of finance to the Uzbek government as vital for two reason: first, the Uzbek government contractually committed to not use forced labour in World Bank project areas and independent monitors in Uzbekistan have presented substantial evidence that it has, and second, suspension would force the Uzbek government to seriously commit to reform in order to regain access to the substantial finance.

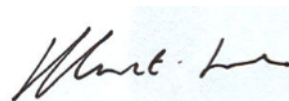
Hence, we would ask the Bank to suspend all new loans to Uzbekistan until such time that the Government, fully commits to preventing forced labour and implements a monitoring system which enables independent reporting without fear of harassment or reprisals.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely



Mark Little
Chairman
Rotarian Action Group against Child Slavery



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