



# Detention and abuse of Elena Urlaeva and other independent labor monitors



The cotton sector



Uzbekistan



Textile/Agriculture



IFC, ADB, WB, EBRD

Elena Urlaeva, the head of the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan, has spent nearly two decades monitoring and documenting human rights abuses in Uzbekistan, and for the last ten years she has reported extensively on issues of forced and child labor in the cotton industry. At age 62, she has been arrested, beaten, strip searched, interrogated for hours at a time, subjected to psychiatric detention and treatment against her will, had her documentation destroyed, and been threatened so many times that she stopped counting.<sup>1</sup>

The evidence gathered over the years by Urlaeva and her colleagues revealed a widespread and systematic state policy of forcing students, teachers, medical workers, other government employees, private-sector employees, and sometimes children, to harvest cotton, as well as to plant and tend the fields in the spring. The system is enforced with government threats to fire people, stop welfare payments to individuals, and to suspend or expel students if they refuse to work in the cotton fields.<sup>2</sup>



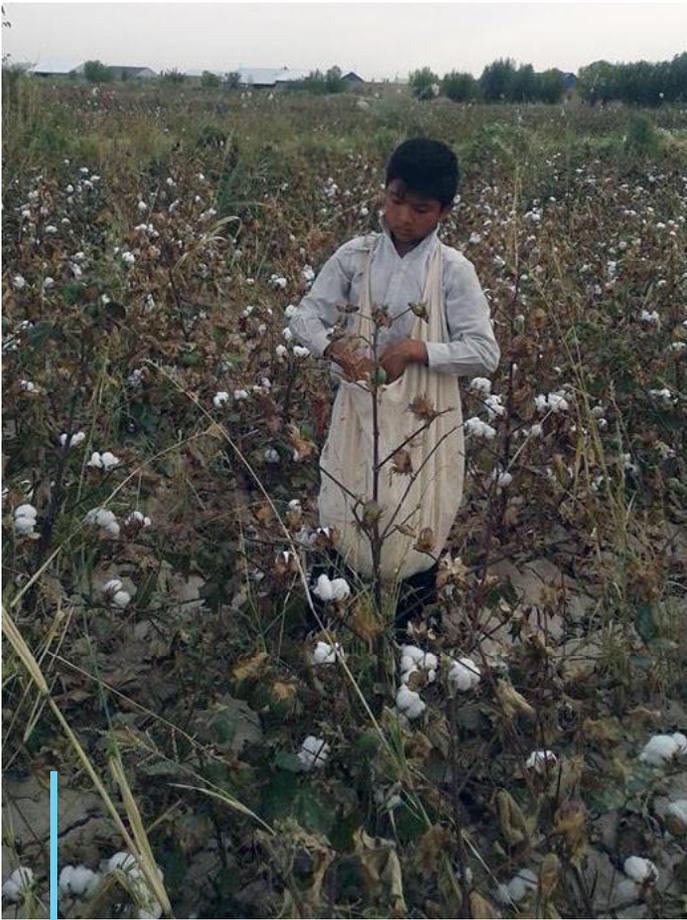
Timur Karpov

Elena Urlaeva was detained at a psychiatric hospital from March 1 to March 23, 2017 for her human rights work.

In September 2013, victims of forced labor filed a complaint with the Inspection Panel, the World Bank's independent accountability mechanism, alleging that one of the Bank's agriculture investments was contributing to child and forced labor.<sup>3</sup> In response, the Bank committed to several measures, including establishing third party monitoring of labor practices in its project areas.<sup>4</sup>

Instead of a third party, however, the World Bank contracted the International Labour Organization (ILO) to conduct the labor monitoring. Because the ILO is a tripartite agency made up of governments, employer organizations, and worker representatives, and in Uzbekistan neither the labor union federation nor the employers' organization is independent from the government, the monitoring was in actuality not independent from the government.<sup>5</sup> The official reports from the monitoring program show a very different reality from the one that Urlaeva and her colleagues have risked their lives to document and report.<sup>6</sup>

The scale of forced labor in Uzbekistan and its systemic entrenchment in the cotton industry raise concerns regarding all international financial institutions' investments benefitting Uzbekistan's cotton sector. One such example is the Amu Bukhara Irrigation System Rehabilitation Project (ABIS) in which the Asian Development Bank (ADB) is investing US\$220 million.<sup>7</sup> Given that Bukhara is a lead cotton producing region in the country, the coordinator of the Cotton Campaign, a multistakeholder coalition, as well as Human Rights Watch, expressed concern about the project in a letter to ADB's President on September 3, 2013, three weeks before the project was approved.<sup>8</sup> The letter referenced the Uzbek authorities' retaliation against human rights defenders, including the case of Uktam Pardaev, a rights activist known for reporting on forced labor, who was beaten and held on spurious charges. On January 27, 2014, the Cotton Campaign sent another letter to ADB's President urging him to halt the project until human rights concerns were addressed, and referencing the



A child working in the cotton harvest.

continued reprisals against labor monitors.<sup>9</sup> To date, the ADB has not taken any public steps to address or even acknowledge the human rights concerns raised by civil society.

In 2015, harassment against Urlaeva and other independent labor monitors in the cotton fields reached unprecedented levels. Dmitry Tikhonov, a journalist and human rights defender, was arrested, beaten, interrogated, and had his home office destroyed by arson, leading him to eventually flee the country.<sup>10</sup>

Uktam Pardaev was imprisoned for two months then released on a suspended sentence, under the condition that he would no longer report on human rights concerns.<sup>11</sup> Police told Pardaev he was subject to travel restrictions and a curfew, neither of which was included in his original sentence.<sup>12</sup> Malohat Eshonkulova, a journalist and activist, was detained with Urlaeva in 2016 due to their monitoring work in Bukhara region, where the ADB project was being implemented. Both

Eshonkulova and Urlaeva were beaten and subjected to interrogation and humiliating strip and body cavity searches.<sup>13</sup> In 2017 Uzbek police raided Eshonkulova's home and confiscated several of her belongings in a nearly eleven-hour search for her computer and cell phone.<sup>14</sup> "Our government very clearly does not want any information about forced labor to reach the international community," Urlaeva says.<sup>15</sup>

World Bank staff have indicated that they have shared concerns about reprisals against civil society with the Uzbek government.<sup>16</sup> At times, though, Bank staff declined to raise such concerns.<sup>17</sup> As government reprisals continued, the Bank did not escalate its response, and it refused to publicly condemn reprisals or sanction the government.

The Cotton Campaign, Human Rights Watch, and the International Labor Rights Forum again contacted the ADB on July 21, 2016, specifically regarding the repeated attacks on human rights defenders across the country. ADB has never responded.<sup>18</sup>

Another example of DFIs' investments in this sector is the \$40 million loan that the International Finance Corporation (IFC) approved in December 2015 to Indorama Kokand Textile, a leading cotton yarn producer in Uzbekistan, to expand its textile plant, which uses solely Uzbek cotton.<sup>19</sup>

On June 30, 2016 Pardaev, Tikhonov, and Urlaeva, together with a forced labor victim who requested confidentiality, filed a complaint with the IFC's independent accountability mechanism, the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO).<sup>20</sup> The complaint entered dispute resolution in March 2018.<sup>21</sup>

At the September 2017 UN General Assembly, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev publicly acknowledged forced labor for the first time on an international stage.<sup>22</sup> World Bank President Jim Kim raised concerns about forced labor with Mirziyoyev in a meeting the next day.<sup>23</sup> However, the World Bank's press statement after the meeting makes no mention of attacks on human rights defenders who report on forced and child labor. On September 21, Uzbek Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov took the unprecedented step of recalling university students and some medical and education workers from the fields.<sup>24</sup> Despite these developments, the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights (UGF) found evidence of forced adult labor throughout Uzbekistan's cotton sector in 2017, including



Uzbek German Forum

in the three districts where the World Bank's South Karakalpakstan Water Resources Management Improvement Project is being implemented and for which the Bank had approved a US\$260.79 million loan in June 2014.<sup>25</sup> Later in the harvest, many recalled workers were sent back, while others were forced to pay for replacement workers.<sup>26</sup>

Other development banks are still considering investing in projects that benefit the Uzbek cotton industry. In October 2017 the European Investment Bank (EIB)

Elena Urlaeva with a child in the cotton fields.

signed a legal framework with Uzbekistan to begin operations there.<sup>27</sup> In November 2017 the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) opened an office in Uzbekistan for the first time since 2010 and is actively seeking to increase its investments, describing this as "*a new stage of engagement with Uzbekistan.*"<sup>28</sup> That same month, the EBRD approved a US\$20 million loan to Hamkorkbank, one of the companies involved in the CAO complaint with the IFC.<sup>29</sup>

## Endnotes

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