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Risks of Forced Labor and Exploitation in Uzbekistan's Agriculture Sector

A recent [joint report](#), *"Farmers Have No Freedom": Abuse and Exploitation of Cotton and Wheat Farmers in Uzbekistan*, by Uzbek Forum for Human Rights and Human Rights Watch based on 75 interviews with farmers throughout Uzbekistan identified several [ILO indicators](#) that determine exposure to the risk of forced labor, including abuse of workers' vulnerability and the use of intimidation and threats by both government officials and private sector actors.

Despite privatization of the agricultural sector in 2018 and President Mirziyoyev's reform agenda, farmers still face significant administrative control and are vulnerable to serious rights violations including:

- Illegal land confiscations obtained through coercion to sign statements of "voluntary" land lease terminations.
- Coercion of farmers to sign contracts for the supply of cotton, grain, and silkworm cocoons with specific companies that have repeatedly failed to pay them for the products they have delivered. In many cases, authorities have failed to enforce court orders compelling the companies to pay.
- Persistent government interference in the agriculture sector including arbitrary punitive actions, threats of land confiscation and violence against farmers who fail to meet production targets.
- Mandatory membership of the Farmer's Council, a government-controlled body whose leadership is appointed by the government.
- Weak oversight and a lack of transparency regarding investments in water-saving technologies in agriculture, which create risks of forced borrowing and corruption in public procurement.
- Coercion to produce silkworm cocoons.

The Uzbek government is violating the human and labor rights of cotton and wheat farmers through a coercive state production system, including penalties such as land seizure for not meeting quotas, now known as "production yield estimates", imposed by the government based on historic yields and soil condition of each individual land plot.

Although the government has ended state-imposed forced labor of cotton pickers in the cotton harvest and has committed to broader reforms, the remaining system of strategic crop cultivation and production in Uzbekistan still creates a risk of forced labor for cotton and wheat farmers.

In interviews, farmers reported that private cotton-textile and wheat production companies have delayed making payments for raw cotton and wheat or have not paid them in full, causing them to

incur tax fines. In some cases, late or non-payments put them in a dire financial situation and can force them to declare bankruptcy. The authorities have in some cases failed to enforce contracts or require companies to pay farmers, even when courts have ordered them to do so.

A hostile and dehumanizing environment persists in Uzbekistan's agricultural sector. Farmers have described being physically and verbally abused during meetings with local officials for not having fulfilled their cotton or wheat quotas. In some cases, police have arbitrarily detained farmers for up to several days without charge for not fulfilling their quotas. Uzbek Forum also documented multiple instances in which police threatened or [arrested local bloggers](#) and monitors who reported on farmers' rights issues.

Farmers in Uzbekistan have rights to just and favorable conditions of work and to freedom of association that are guaranteed by the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which Uzbekistan ratified in 1995, as well as ILO Convention 87, ratified by Uzbekistan in December 2016.

Illegal Land Seizures

Uzbekistan's agricultural system prevents cotton and wheat farmers from operating independently or having control over their working conditions, and in practice makes them subservient to the state. All agricultural land is owned by the state and farmers typically have land leases of 30 years. These land lease agreements do not protect farmers from illegal and arbitrary land seizure by local authorities, who regularly threaten to seize land if farmers have not fulfilled their quotas.

In 2019, the EBRD, IFC and ADB-funded [Indorama Agro](#) project saw the transfer of 50,000 hectares of farm land to the company based on ["voluntary" land lease terminations](#) signed by farmers through coercion.

Farmers who have filed lawsuits to contest land seizure by the government seldom find redress in Uzbekistan's courts and on the rare occasion they do, local officials fail to enforce court decisions to return the land to the farmer.

Silkworm Cocoons

There is no obligation for farmers to produce silkworm cocoons under the terms of their land leases. Nonetheless, from March – April each year, local officials assign cotton and wheat farmers production quotas for the delivery of cocoons to silk clusters (private silk-producing companies). Refusal to produce cocoons can result in punitive measures, including obstruction of irrigation, threat of land seizure and even [physical violence](#). Citizen journalists reporting on the issue have been [beaten](#), detained, intimidated and harassed. Despite privatization, government oversight and interference in the sector persists.

Water Saving Technologies

EBRD has made multimillion dollar investments in [projects](#) to improve many issues affecting Uzbekistan's most precious resource: water. This involves investments in the modernization of infrastructure and water saving technologies in areas affecting farmers.

Farmers interviewed by Uzbek Forum have described being coerced by officials into taking out expensive loans to install drip irrigation systems that are defective or not appropriate for their land. Often, farmers are not given a copy of the purchase contract so that redress is not possible, leaving them in debt and at risk of reprisals for not fulfilling government policies on water management. In some cases, the supplier of these water saving technologies is the cluster which farmers are under contract with, while others have no experience in delivering these type of technologies. The loans received by farmers are transferred directly to the companies, leaving farmers with no control over the installation process.

Given the inherent risks in Uzbekistan's agriculture sector and the high dependency of farmers on the availability of water, further EBRD loans to the sector may risk facilitating coercion and increasing the debts of farmers.

Recommendations to EBRD:

- Conduct human rights due diligence and ensure meaningful stakeholder engagement to identify the potential human rights impacts of all project activities and desist from financing projects that could contribute to human rights violations.
- Ensure full and open public participation without risk of retaliation against those expressing critical views.
- Ensure that any transfers of agricultural land, in particular those that have occurred through so-called "voluntary" land lease terminations, were genuinely made voluntarily, without pressure or coercion.
- Ensure that loans to the agriculture sector are not contributing to coercion.
- Use investor leverage to ensure that the Uzbek government implements legislation that genuinely protects farmers and their rights.
- Support educational programs for farmers to enable them to make informed decisions about investments and projects that will affect them.
- Commit to ensuring remedy for project affected people where violations have occurred, including in the event of an early exit through pre-payment of a loan.
- Desist from awarding loans to clients who have a track record of non-compliance with the safeguards of development finance institutions or where investigations into non-compliance are ongoing.