



## **Cotton Campaign Additional Information on Turkmenistan’s Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (combined fifth and sixth reports)**

### **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 97th Session (26 August – 13 September 2024)**

The Cotton Campaign<sup>1</sup> is pleased to submit evidence in advance of the 2024 review of Turkmenistan by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (hereafter “The Committee”) on its compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This submission follows our written input to the List of Issues<sup>2</sup>, and provides additional information on evidence of child labour collected by independent monitors during the 2023 cotton harvest in Turkmenistan.<sup>3</sup> We include suggested questions and recommendations for Committee members to consider during the periodic review of Turkmenistan, and respond to the Government of Turkmenistan’s reply to the List of Issues in relation to child labour.

Our call is for the Government of Turkmenistan to eliminate child labour in the annual cotton harvest. While the Government no longer mobilises children to pick cotton, child labour in the harvest persists and is primarily driven by the state’s policy of forcing adults to pick cotton or pay for a replacement, in combination with poverty. Children are often paid by public sector employees to pick cotton on their behalf (acting as replacement pickers), or they pick cotton to replace a relative who was forcibly mobilised. For this reason, it is essential for the Government to address child labour not in a vacuum, but as intrinsically linked and driven by the system of state-imposed labour. The eradication of child labour in Turkmenistan therefore requires robust reforms to end the broader system of forced labour,

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<sup>1</sup> The Cotton Campaign is a coalition of international human and labour rights NGOs, brand and retail associations, responsible investor organisations, supply chain transparency groups, and academic partners, united to end forced labour and promote decent work for cotton workers in Central Asia. See <https://www.cottoncampaign.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> Cotton Campaign, ‘Written input to the List of Issues Prior to Reporting (LOIPR) ahead of Turkmenistan’s review on its fifth and sixth reports’ (2024), <https://www.cottoncampaign.org/resources-turkmenistan/nbspcotton-campaign-submission-to-the-un-committee-on-the-elimination-of-discrimination-against-womennbspcedaw-xdn2r>.

<sup>3</sup> Information for this submission is drawn from primary data collected in 2023 by independent field monitors for Turkmen.News and the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, reported in the 2024 report ‘Forced Labor in Turkmenistan Cotton: Critical Moment to Increase Pressure for Change’, [https://www.cottoncampaign.org/s/CC\\_TKM\\_harvest\\_report2023\\_LR.pdf](https://www.cottoncampaign.org/s/CC_TKM_harvest_report2023_LR.pdf), and supplemented by desk research from reputable sources.

including via an emphasis on enabling fundamental rights. We ask that the Committee's recommendations to the State party support this call.

### **Child Labour (Article 32)**

**List of Issues:** Under 13 (e), the Committee requested the Government of Turkmenistan to provide information on "Steps taken to enforce the prohibition of child labour, including reporting any cases of child labour offences, the number of conducted investigations, findings of violations, and penalties or sanctions imposed."

**Government reply:** In its reply to the List of Issues, the Government of Turkmenistan stated that its intention to cooperate with the International Labour Organization (ILO) is an important and necessary step towards preventing the practice of using child labour, including via the implementation of a framework of cooperation over the period 2021–2024. This includes a 2024–2025 Roadmap for cooperation with the ILO<sup>4</sup>, which has the following provisions on child labour:

- A commitment by the Government of Turkmenistan to strengthen policy frameworks and measures to prevent child labour. The Government committed to include cotton picking on the list of jobs, professions and positions with harmful and hazardous working conditions. This would recognise cotton picking as among the worst forms of child labour, which are prohibited under Turkmen law.
- A commitment by the Government of Turkmenistan to conduct awareness-raising campaigns about the prohibition of child labour in the harvest.

The Government also noted in its response to the List of Issues that its National Action Plan for the Implementation of Children's Rights in Turkmenistan (2023–2028) includes three specific goals relating to preventing child labour and strengthening enforcement of legislation that prohibits child labour.

**Cotton Campaign response:** The Cotton Campaign Coalition welcomes the signing of the 2024–2025 Roadmap with the ILO. This marks an important acknowledgement by the Government of Turkmenistan that forced labour exists in the cotton sector and a commitment to address it. The Cotton Campaign also welcomes the inclusion in the Roadmap of specific provisions to end and prevent the use of child labour in the cotton harvest.

However, to ensure that child labour in the harvest is effectively eliminated and the reforms are sustainable, the Government of Turkmenistan should not address child labour in isolation, but as intrinsically linked to and driven by the system of state-imposed labour. The eradication of child labour in the harvest therefore requires robust reforms to end the broader system of state-imposed forced labour of adults, including via an emphasis on enabling fundamental rights such as freedom of association and freedom of expression.

We also bring to your attention that the Roadmap includes no benchmarks against which implementation progress can be measured, nor does it acknowledge or incorporate measures to address the broader repressive environment in which the state-imposed

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<sup>4</sup> Roadmap of cooperation activities between the ILO and the Government of Turkmenistan for 2024–2025, <https://www.ilo.org/resource/other/adopted-roadmap-cooperation-activities-between-ilo-and-government>.

forced labour occurs. For example, the Roadmap does not require the Government to take measures to ensure that citizens raising complaints about forced labour are protected against potential negative consequences such as intimidation or retaliation by Government officials or those acting on behalf of the Government. It also does not incorporate measures to enable and protect fundamental rights, including freedoms of expression - which is essential for the safety of independent monitors, state employees, farmers, and others who choose to report on and share information on the cotton harvest - and association, which are critical to effectively combating forced labour.

### **Additional information on child labour from the 2023 harvest**

Since the List of Issues was published in February 2024, the findings of independent monitors from the 2023 cotton harvest in Turkmenistan have been released.<sup>5</sup> The report, published by the Cotton Campaign in May 2024, found that child labour was used in the 2023 harvest, driven by both poverty and the forced labour system, despite the Turkmen Government no longer mobilising children to pick cotton.<sup>6</sup>

Turkmen.News, a frontline partner of the Cotton Campaign<sup>7</sup>, monitored and documented the country-wide participation of school-age children throughout the 2023 cotton harvest. The number of children observed in the cotton fields varied due to metrics such as whether school was in session that day, and how plentiful the cotton harvest was. The 2023 cotton harvest began in mid-August, while children were still on summer vacation from school. At the beginning of the school year, the number of children involved in the cotton harvest decreased on weekdays.

While the state did not directly organise child labour, the state's policy of forcing adults to pick cotton or pay for a replacement appeared to be the primary driver of child labour, since many children who picked cotton did so to earn money as replacement pickers or to replace a relative. Furthermore, tenant farmers sometimes pick cotton as a family, which often includes children as young as 10 years old.<sup>8</sup>

***"There are many teenagers among [replacement pickers] who help their families in this way. For a day of work they ask about 30-40 manats (US\$1.50-2)",*** said one of the Lebap residents mobilised to pick cotton.<sup>9</sup> In Mary region, monitors also reported school children picking cotton, with an estimated 30-40 kilograms of cotton picked in a day, earning them 20 manats (US\$1) per day.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The independent monitoring was conducted in four of the five regions of Turkmenistan: Dashoguz, Balkan, Mary, and Lebap. The monitors are predominantly employees of different state organisations who are forced to pick cotton. They have years of experience in documenting forced labour in the cotton sector in Turkmenistan, having received training on labour laws and provisions, interviewing techniques, data collection and reporting methodology, and physical and cybersecurity.

<sup>6</sup> Turkmen.News, Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, Cotton Campaign, 'Forced Labor in Turkmenistan Cotton: Critical Moment to Increase Pressure for Change' (2024), op cit.

<sup>7</sup> Turkmen.News have monitored the cotton harvest in Turkmenistan since 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Turkmen.News, interview with tenant farmer, Mary region, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> В Туркменистане начали собирать хлопок, бюджетники снова на полях [Cotton picking has begun in Turkmenistan, state employees are back in the fields], Радио Азатлык [Radio Azatlyk] (Aug. 19, 2023), <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/v-turkmenistane-nachali-sobirat-hlopok-byudzhetniki-snova-na-polyah-/32554389.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Turkmen.News local monitor, Sakarchage district of Mary region, 2023.

In 2023, Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, another Turkmen partner of the Cotton Campaign which independently monitors cotton production in Turkmenistan, received information that teachers in rural areas were required to periodically pass the cotton fields and, if they saw school-age children picking cotton along with their parents, to inform the parents that child labour is prohibited. Apparently, this was in response to a verbal order provided through the Ministry of Education.<sup>11</sup> However, it is unclear whether this measure was effective in reducing the number of children in the fields. This measure also fails to acknowledge that child labour is driven by the system of adult forced labour and that children were likely picking cotton to support their parents in meeting the quotas imposed on them by local administrations, or as replacement pickers for other state employees.

Independent monitors recorded cases of children not only picking cotton, but also doing other work in the fields. Some worked as “carriers,” hauling cotton picked by others across the field to be weighed and recorded by farmers. Children would carry several sacks full of cotton weighing around 20 kilograms each through difficult-to-navigate cotton fields, a physically draining task exacerbated by the risk of falling and injuring oneself.

During an interview with an independent monitor, a 15-year-old school boy in 10th grade from Aynakoy village in Mary region said he worked as a carrier during the harvest and made 50 manats (US\$2.5) per day.<sup>12</sup> He said that the school director did not oppose him picking cotton and in fact, pupils can even ask for a day off from school to work in the cotton fields, a request which is generally granted.<sup>13</sup> He further said that his family approved of him working in the cotton fields when he had days off from school.<sup>14</sup>

### **Suggested questions for the state-party review:**

1. What steps has the Government taken to enforce all relevant legislation prohibiting child labour, including:
  - a. Whether any offences of child labour in the harvest have been reported, and if so, how many?
  - b. Whether any investigations of child labour in the harvest have been conducted, and if so, how many?
  - c. Whether any violations have been found or penalties/sanctions imposed under all such legislation, and if so, how many?
2. What measures will the Government take in advance of the 2024 harvest, to ensure that child labour is not used and that all relevant legislation prohibiting child labour is enforced?
3. What steps has the Government taken to address the root causes of state-imposed forced labour and child labour in the cotton sector, including to eliminate quotas for cotton production, ensure that state employees are protected from forced mobilisation and extortion, prosecute perpetrators, and provide remedy to victims?
4. What measures has the Government taken to allow the unimpeded operation of civil society activists, human rights defenders, and independent journalists to document and report on labour conditions, including child labour, without fear of reprisal?

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<sup>11</sup> В Туркменистане учителей школ освободили от сбора хлопка [In Turkmenistan, school teachers were exempted from picking cotton], Хроника Туркменистана [Chronicles of Turkmenistan] (18 September, 2023), <https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/09/teachers-serfdom-abolition/>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

5. How will the Government and ILO measure progress on the implementation of the 2024-5 Roadmap of cooperation activities, including in relation the provisions on child labour?

**Suggested recommendations for the state-party review:**

1. Ensure effective implementation of existing legislation prohibiting child labour, including by conducting thorough investigations into incidents of child labour in the cotton harvest.
2. Make public, high-level policy statements condemning forced labour and child labour in the cotton harvest and make clear that all work should be voluntary and fairly compensated.
3. Instruct government officials at all levels and citizens who act on behalf of the government not to use coercion to mobilise anyone to work or extortion for harvest-related expenses or personal enrichment.