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Press Conference:
Cotton Campaign and Uzbekistan Government on
Labor Conditions in Uzbekistan's Cotton Sector

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Part 1

Good afternoon,

I would like to start by thanking Madam Narbayeva for her remarks and by thanking her and Minister Khusanov for their partnership in today's event and for the work they and many others in the government of Uzbekistan have done to make today possible.

I also want to acknowledge the work of Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, an independent human rights organization founded by Umida Niyazova, for its vital contribution to ending forced and child labor in Uzbekistan's cotton harvest. For 11 years, Uzbek Forum's monitors have conducted independent monitoring of the cotton harvest, interviewing thousands of workers, farmers, government officials—often at great personal risk. Uzbek Forum and its monitors have been and remain core partners of the Cotton Campaign. Their bravery, skill, and commitment to improving the lives of working people of Uzbekistan has not only exposed the problems of child and forced labor, but also demonstrated the key role played by civil society in promoting and protecting labor rights and pushing for reform.

I am going to highlight Uzbek Forum's key findings from its monitoring of the 2021 harvest.

- For the first time in eleven consecutive years of monitoring forced child and adult labor in Uzbekistan's cotton fields, Uzbek Forum for Human Rights (Uzbek Forum) found no systemic or systematic, government-imposed forced labor during the cotton harvest.
- The central government's policy of preventing the forced labor of cotton pickers was visible and tangible and was communicated throughout all branches of government.
- Some cases of forced labor were identified but the Labor Inspectorate promptly investigated every case identified.

Despite these positive developments, Uzbek Forum identified ongoing risks for labor exploitation and forced labor, especially the continued interference or involvement by some local officials in the management of the cotton harvest, the perception among even some voluntary pickers that they would suffer a penalty or negative consequence if they refused to pick cotton.

Some of the risks identified include:

- The lack of fair and effective recruitment systems for seasonal labor—the reliance on local officials and mahalla councils to recruit labor in some areas leads to the use of or perception of coercion among some pickers.
- Population density and shortage of labor that can lead to insufficient voluntary pickers in some areas and some stages of the harvest.
- The lack of freedom of association for workers, and concrete independent mechanisms for field-level monitoring, grievance, and remedy.
- Finally, there are restrictions on the enabling environment, particularly the registration of independent groups, that is necessary for independent monitoring and reporting of labor rights violations and essential for responsible sourcing.

Overall, the 2021 findings represent a meaningful break from Uzbekistan’s long history of state-imposed forced labor and provide a strong measure of confidence that continued improvements to reduce existing labor risks can be made. We recognize this as a landmark achievement and one that represents a real turning point for labor rights in Uzbekistan and for the emerging textile industry.

Part 2

Uzbekistan’s cotton and textile sector is at a real turning point, with both tremendous opportunity and ongoing risks. Uzbekistan is building a vertically-integrated cotton and textile industry where there is the potential to trace cotton from the field all the way to finished goods. Many clusters [cotton textile companies] are innovating and investing in land, workers, and technology. This provides global brands and retailers an unprecedented opportunity for visibility and traceability down to the raw material level.

However, there are, as yet, no mechanisms for independent monitoring, grievance, and remedy to both ensure and demonstrate full labor rights protections in Uzbek cotton supply chains. There is now the opportunity to build on the success and mitigate the risks to create a new kind of supply chain, in which transparency and labor standards are observed at every level. Here there is work to be done by both government and companies.

To do this, government must allow civil society groups and workers organizations to develop and to establish concrete mechanisms for worker voice and protection. And brands and suppliers must invest in workers’ rights and maintain high standards.