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Media contact: Stefanie Spear, sspear@asyousow.org, 216-387-1609

Gaspar Matalaev Free After Three Years of Unjust Imprisonment for Reporting on Forced Labor in Turkmenistan Cotton Fields

WASHINGTON, D.C.—SEPT. 9, 2019—Gaspar Matalaev, a labor rights monitor from Turkmenistan, [was released from prison](#) on Sept. 6 after three years' imprisonment in retaliation for his reporting on forced labor. A court in Turkmenabat sentenced Matalaev on spurious charges of fraud in 2016 and Matalaev served the entire three-year sentence.

“We are relieved that Gaspar is out of prison and home with his family where he belongs,” said Ruslan Myatiev, director of turkmen.news, a member of the Cotton Campaign. “But make no mistake, every day that Gaspar spent in prison was a travesty of justice to punish him for his human rights work and intimidate others from speaking out about abuses.”

Gaspar Matalaev, a reporter with turkmen.news who had monitored and reported on the systematic use of forced adult and child labor in Turkmenistan during cotton harvesting, was arrested in October 2016, just two days after turkmen.news [published](#) his extensive report on Turkmenistan's labor practices. While in detention, Matalaev was tortured by electric shock and held incommunicado. Throughout the investigation and trial, he did not have access to effective legal representation or to key files, information, and documents. The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions determined that Matalaev's arrest and imprisonment [was arbitrary](#).

The 2019 annual cotton harvest began in late August in Turkmenistan and turkmen.news monitors have already [reported](#) on the state-sponsored forced labor of teachers and civil servants.

“Matalaev and others take great personal risks when they document these abuses,” said Judy Gearhart, executive director at the International Labor Rights Forum, which hosts the Cotton Campaign. “Turkmenistan's international partners, including in the U.S., EU, and the international development banks, should use their influence with the government of Turkmenistan to press for greater protections for human rights monitors

and journalists.” International Labor Rights Forum [honored Matalaev](#) with its annual Labor Rights Defender award in 2019.

More than 100,000 people [signed a petition](#) calling on the government of Turkmenistan to release Matalaev. "Although we are extremely disappointed that Gaspar Matalaev served his full sentence, our global and united voice, the petitioners, and our actions all expressed solidarity that we hope offered succor as he endured the challenging conditions of his detention," said Joanna Ewart-James, executive director of Freedom United.

Turkmenistan, one of the most [closed and repressive countries in the world](#), uses systematic forced labor to harvest cotton. Each year, the government of Turkmenistan forces tens of thousands of workers from public and private sectors to either pick cotton during the harvest season or to pay money to their supervisors to hire a replacement worker to pick cotton instead. This abuse takes place under the threat of punishment, including public censure, loss of wages from their regular jobs, and termination of employment. The government treats refusal to contribute to the cotton harvest as insubordination, incitement to sabotage, and even “contempt of the homeland.”

Cotton and cotton products, including garments and home goods, are the second largest export for Turkmenistan after petroleum. Turkmenistan cotton [finds its way into U.S. and European markets](#), in violation of laws that prohibit the sale of goods made with forced labor. The U.S. State Department [ranked Turkmenistan Tier 3](#), the lowest ranking on its annual Trafficking in Persons report. In addition, cotton from Turkmenistan is on the [Labor Department’s list](#) of goods produced with child or forced labor, and the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency [prohibits](#) the import of cotton or cotton products from Turkmenistan.

The Cotton Campaign and investors [called on companies](#) to sign the [Turkmen Cotton Pledge](#), and work to ensure that cotton from Turkmenistan produced with forced labor does not enter their supply chains. Thus far 70 major apparel and home goods brands and industry associations have [signed the pledge](#).

“Thanks to the work of reporters and human rights defenders like Gaspar Matalaev, companies and consumers can make informed sourcing and purchasing decisions,” said Patricia Jurewicz, vice president of the Responsible Sourcing Network, Cotton Campaign co-founder, and host of the Turkmen Cotton Pledge. “Companies can take a stand to end the human rights abuses in Turkmenistan, and ensure that materials produced with forced labor do not enter their supply chains.”

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[Cotton Campaign](#) is a global coalition of human rights, labor, responsible investor, and business organizations dedicated to eradicating child and forced labor in cotton production.

[Responsible Sourcing Network](#) is a U.S.-based NGO that champions human rights with vulnerable communities in the mining and harvesting of raw materials found in products we use every day.

[Turkmen.news](#) (the successor to Alternative Turkmenistan News) is an independent news and human rights organization, founded in 2010.

[Freedom United](#) is the world's largest community dedicated to ending human trafficking & modern slavery.

[International Labor Rights Forum](#) is a human rights organization that advances dignity and justice for workers in the global economy.