

**Opening and Closing Remarks of Bennett Freeman  
Co-Founder, Cotton Campaign**

**Tashkent, Uzbekistan  
March 10, 2022**

**My Cotton Campaign colleagues and I have looked forward to this day for many years.** It was in late 2007 and early 2008 that some of us first came together—with the encouragement of courageous activists here in Uzbekistan—to bring to the world’s attention a great injustice and to take action to end it.

**We commend President Mirziyoyev’s leadership** in initiating and implementing the historic reforms necessary to end state-imposed forced labor. **We also congratulate Senate Chairperson Narbaeva** for her personal leadership and initiative in this extraordinary effort. Madame Narbaeva has been consistent in acknowledging problems and persistent in encouraging solutions. We have deeply appreciated our engagement with her over the last four years. We have also appreciated our close consultations with Minister Khusanov and the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations—and with other Uzbek government ministries—through the reform process.

**We salute the determination and courage of the activists and monitors** who—sometimes at personal risk to themselves—have recorded and reported forced labor whenever and wherever they have observed it. This achievement is most fundamentally theirs—on behalf of all Uzbeks.

**But this achievement is also the most significant single country victory in the global battle against forced labor so far in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.** That victory has also been made possible by many dedicated international actors: the ILO, its Third-Party Monitoring and broader Decent Work initiatives; by foreign governments and international institutions including the World Bank/IFC; by the Cotton Campaign’s partners ranging from trade unions, labor and human rights advocates to global brands, apparel industry associations and responsible investors over these last 14 years. This national and international victory can be an inspiration for the whole world.

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**We have an important and urgent task here and now in Uzbekistan.** That task is to reinforce reforms not only to ensure that they are irreversible, but also to take further tangible, sustainable steps to protect and support labor rights and human rights. Now is the time to show the world that Uzbekistan is ready to move forward into a new era of opportunity—and to create a new model for responsible sourcing working with international brands and innovative clusters.

**So today we not only commend Uzbekistan. We also challenge the Government of Uzbekistan to open space for civil society and to create the enabling environment that is essential for responsible sourcing** that will attract global brands and protect labor and human rights. We encourage those global brands that stood by the Pledge over the years to assess the opportunities even as they address the risks.

**The Cotton Campaign will continue to stand and work with Uzbek workers, farmers, and activists in the cause of reform.** We will remain committed to this great cause with the same steadfastness of purpose that has forged this common achievement and made possible the announcement that we have made today ending our call of a for a global boycott of cotton from Uzbekistan.

Thank you again, Madame Narbaeva and Minister Khusanov, on behalf of the Cotton Campaign.