

PRESS RELEASE

Rights groups request US suspension of importation of prison and forced labour cotton from China

Legal submission follows similar move in the UK detailing the plight of mass incarcerated Uyghurs.

For release on 31 August 2020 at 8am (GMT+1)

The Global Legal Action Network (GLAN), in partnership with the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), have submitted a legal petition to the United States' Customs and Border Protection (CBP) requesting a halt to the importation of cotton goods from East Turkistan (Xinjiang), China. The petition includes evidence of the use of the persecuted Uyghur people in its cotton industry and names a number of major brands that openly source cotton in Xinjiang, including **Muji and Uniqlo**. GLAN and WUC argue that current imports into the US involve forced and prison labour on a large scale and violate Section 307 of the Tariff Act of 1930, which prohibits the importation of such goods into the US.

In April 2020 the UK government received similar evidence from GLAN and WUC who called for a halt to the importation of all cotton goods produced in Xinjiang with forced and prison labor.

The systematic imprisonment of Uyghurs is intimately linked with the Xinjiang region's cotton industry, which accounts for 84% of the cotton produced by China. Uyghurs are forced to work in factories and prisons in the region – which export products, particularly textiles – to international markets, including to the US. Since Xinjiang cotton is so ubiquitous, almost all products made with Chinese cotton are tainted with forced and prison labor, including products manufactured outside Xinjiang and even globally.

Rahima Mahmut, the UK project director for the World Uyghur Congress and a UK resident, said: "It is painful knowing that all of these products sold in both the US and the UK are produced by my people, under terrible conditions of forced labor. As Uyghurs we want the US government take action to stop the importation of such

products to ensure that companies profiting off of these human rights abuses move their supply chains away from China.”

“The Chinese government is systematically forcing huge numbers of people into forced labour. Both the UK and the US governments have made statements condemning these human rights abuses. It’s time that they now also take steps to block these imports and enforce their laws,” said Dearbhla Minogue, a legal officer with GLAN. “This petition is another example of increased international collaboration between organisations who are horrified by the crimes taking place in Xinjiang. China will one day have to accept that the international community will not stand for its abuses.”

GLAN and WUC’ petition requests that CBP prohibit the importation of cotton and cotton-made goods from Xinjiang, China in a two phased manner. First, by issuing a Withhold and Release Order (WRO) against all cotton-made goods from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), as well as against goods produced by companies outside the XUAR that have subsidiaries or operations in the XUAR. Secondly, importers with suppliers outside of XUAR that source cotton inputs from XUAR should be given a period of 6 months to shift to suppliers that do not use forced Uyghur labour. If this is not accomplished within 6 months, the petitioners request CBP to issue another WRO prohibiting cotton-made goods from such suppliers.

Dr Gearóid Ó Cuinn, GLAN’s Director, said, “the UK, the EU and other European states must strengthen corporate accountability legislation to make companies legally responsible for preventing forced labour in their supply chains. A number have already introduced, or are looking to introduce, mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence laws. We urge the EU and the UK to urgently introduce these laws, in order to make sure companies are required to take action to tackle their complicity in the abuse of Uyghurs”

Background

Since 2017, authorities have detained over one million Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, using a network of high-security ‘de- extremification’ and prison camps, focused on eliminating Uyghur life and culture in order to exert full control over them. It is a highly organised and systematic scheme which has been directed by the Chinese president, Xi Jinping. The Chinese government says that these detentions are no more than voluntary internships aimed at poverty alleviation and de-radicalisation, but documents leaked in late 2019 showed that these detentions are coercive and highly secretive: detention centre operators are urged to “prevent escapes,” ensure “full video

surveillance coverage of dormitories and classrooms free of blind spots, ensuring that guards on duty can monitor in real time,” in addition to calling for “strict secrecy.” China’s mass detention of an ethnic group appears to be on a scale not seen since World War II. This mass incarceration, ill-treatment and exaction of forced labour may amount to crimes against humanity.

Notes

The Global Legal Action Network (GLAN) is a non-profit organisation made up of legal practitioners, academics and investigative journalists that pursues innovative legal actions across borders, challenging states and other powerful actors involved with human rights violations and systemic injustice.. GLAN has offices in the UK (London) and Ireland (Galway). Contact: Dr Gearóid Ó Cuinn (Director) | gocuinn@glanlaw.org | +447521203427 | Dearbhla Minogue (Legal Officer) | dminogue@glanlaw.org | +447584599580 | [@glan_law](https://twitter.com/glan_law) | www.glanlaw.org.

The World Uyghur Congress (WUC) is a Munich-based non-governmental organisation that strives to promote democracy, human rights and freedom for the Uyghur people through peaceful, nonviolent, and democratic means in order to determine their political future. Contact: Rahima Mahmut,(U.K. Project Director) rahima@UyghurCongress.org | +447830039693 <https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/>