



COTTON CHRONICLE 2022

OBSERVATIONS OF UZBEKISTAN'S COTTON HARVEST



UZBEK FORUM
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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This chronicle is based on a review of information published in the press and social media, as well as reports from Uzbek Forum monitors covering some 30 cotton-growing districts of the country.

Preliminary findings show:

- Continued strict government control of the cotton harvest.
- Attempts by local authorities to coerce people to go to the fields in districts where there are insufficient pickers and production targets are lagging.
- Pressure on mahallas to recruit sufficient numbers of pickers.
- Persistence of production quotas, now known as forecasts, at district levels.
- Violence used to coerce farmers to surrender their cotton to clusters.
- Farmers forced to sign blank contracts with no price for their cotton.
- Attempts to prevent cooperatives from operating.
- Illegal land confiscations instigated by local authorities.
- Responsiveness of the authorities to reports of forced labor.



September 2022 , Mirishkor district , Kashkadarya region .
Cotton pickers going to the fields . © Uzbek Forum

Organization of the Harvest

The annual cotton harvest in Uzbekistan, which began in stages in early September, is coming to an end. According to the **Ministry of Agriculture**, 21,379 brigades covering nearly two million pickers were formed for the 2022 cotton harvest season.

According to the daily “2022 raw cotton harvest figures,” as of October 24, 94% of just under 3.5 million tons of the planned cotton crop had been harvested.

The organization of the cotton harvest is centrally supervised all along the chain of command. Mahalla charimen and hokims report daily to the government on the amount of cotton harvested and the performance of farms, which are required to deliver a pre-determined amount of cotton according to their contracts with clusters.

Despite the abolition of the state order for cotton production and the transition to the privatized “cluster” system, the mechanism and organization of the cotton harvest remain practically unchanged. As before, the heads of four divisions – the prosecutor, the head of police, the head of tax inspection, and district and regional hokims – are responsible for the quality and timely delivery of cotton.

An employee of the Khorezm regional hokimiyat told Uzbek Forum that every morning the heads of regions hold meetings with districts hokims, the chairmen of mahallas, and heads of various state organizations to discuss the daily indicators of the cotton harvest and the recruitment of cotton-picking brigades. During these meetings, hokims of districts that are lagging behind production targets are given strict instructions to improve the performance of the harvest.

The role of regional hokims is to report daily on the performance of the cotton harvest during conference calls with the Deputy Prime Minister, Shukhrat Ganiev. Here too, the heads of regions that are under-performing are issued warnings for not fulfilling quotas.



September 2022 , Buvayda district , Ferghana region . Poster at the entrance of the district water distribution organization : “Forced labor is prohibited” . © Uzbek Forum

Child and Forced Labor

The Uzbek government has unequivocally declared that child labor in the cotton fields is unacceptable, and local mahallas and other government structures have generally ensured that children do not participate in the cotton harvest. However, in Kasbi and Mirishkor districts of Kashkadarya region, Uzbek Forum monitors observed 12-13-year-old children who had come to pick cotton with their parents. In all cases, the main reasons were poverty and the children’s desire to help their parents or earn money for their own needs. In one case, a 16-year-old in Mirishkor district told monitors that his school did not provide quality education and that he needed money to pay for a tutor.

Accompanying adults were aware that cotton picking is prohibited for children, but did not consider it to be problematic because, in their opinion, the children were only picking cotton for a few hours a day after school or on weekends. However, in Kasbi district in Kashkadarya, children who were observed picking cotton were exposed to considerable danger because of harvesting machines simultaneously operating in the fields.

The vast majority of pickers during the 2022 harvest pick cotton voluntarily. Some employees of organizations located near the cotton fields took time off to earn extra money by picking cotton. The minimum wage recommended by the state for cotton picking in 2022 is between 1,500-2,000 soums (approximately \$0.14 - \$0.18) per kilo depending on the stage of the harvest.



September 2022 , Vobkent district , Bukhara region . Political party representative hands out gifts to pickers . © Press Service of the Vobkent District Hokimiyat .

Numerous press releases from hokimiyats reported on valuable gifts given to cotton pickers as bonuses from prosecutors, deputies of political parties and heads of various departments. In official reports on the cotton harvest performance, the term “cotton state order” is habitually used, since the role of the state in organizing the cotton harvest is essentially the same as in all previous years.

Beginning in the first half of October, hokims ordered employees of organizations to be sent to the fields in a number of districts that were struggling to fulfill production targets and/or lacked sufficient pickers. As of the second week of October, dozens of reports began appearing on social media about government employees being forced to pick cotton and pressure on mahalla chairmen to find enough pickers to accelerate the harvest.

In an audio recording distributed online on September 24, the deputy hokim of the Jalakuduk district of Andijan region was heard threatening mahalla chairmen with dismissal or wage cuts if more pickers did not come to the fields. “You get paid. Why don’t you have enough people. What’s your problem?”, asked the deputy hokim. A similar audio was published by Radio Ozodlik on October 11, allegedly recorded during a meeting in the

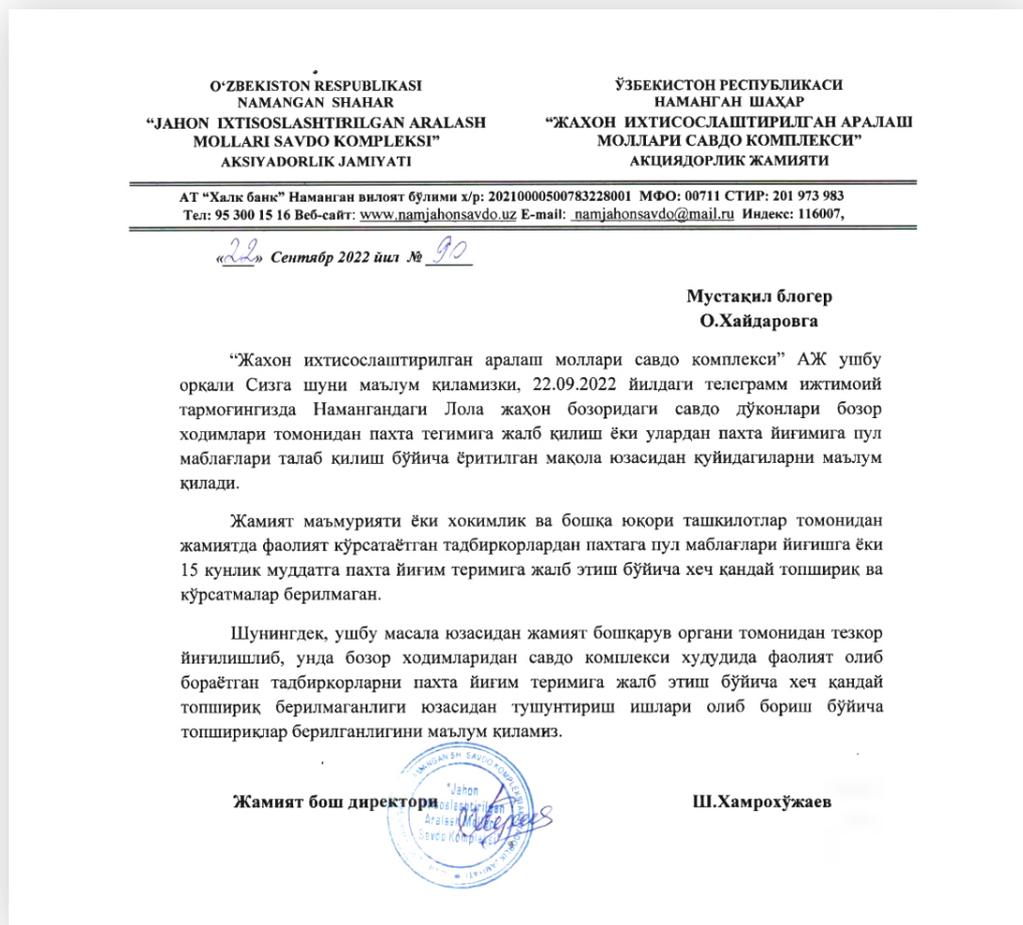
hokimiyat in Zarafshan district of Navoi region in which a hokimiyat official threatens mahalla chairmen and demands that they bring more pickers to the fields.

It is worth noting that more than a hundred mahalla employees interviewed by Uzbek Forum during the 2021 cotton harvest responded that although the mahalla had always served as the de facto recruitment authority for cotton pickers, it does not formally fall under the remit of mahalla employees.

In many cases, coercion of people to pick cotton stopped following the publication of complaints of forced labor in the press or social media. For instance, the Eltuz telegram channel **reported** on October 5 that employees of organizations were instructed by the hokim of Navoi City to gather the following day at the local clinic and go to the cotton fields. However, after the message was published by Eltuz, the forced mobilization was cancelled.

Entrepreneurs working in large markets in three districts told bloggers that market managers had been ordered by the hokimiyat to demand that entrepreneurs hire pickers for 15 days or allocate funds to buy gifts or food for pickers.

Similar messages were shared on social media from entrepreneurs in markets in Namangan who had been ordered to send pickers to Mingbulok and Kokand districts in Ferghana region. An entrepreneur in Yukorichirchik district of Tashkent region reported that the deputy hokim demanded between 3-10 million soums (approximately \$270 - \$898) from private entrepreneurs as assistance for the cotton harvest.



September 2022, Namangan city. Letter to blogger Olimjon Khaidarov from a market manager in response to the blogger's post denying allegations of coercion of entrepreneurs by market management. © Olimjon Khaidarov

From the second half of October, mobilization of employees of organizations for cotton picking, especially on weekends, intensified. Mass mobilization for cotton picking was recorded in Furkat and Yazavan districts of Ferghana region, Kasan, Karshi and Mirishkor districts of Kashkadarya region, and Kegeyli and Shumanay districts of Karakalpakstan. In a backward development in Shumanay district, workers at a number of large organizations such as Power Grid and Uztransgaz, who were not mobilized to pick cotton during last year's harvest, were ordered to go to the fields in 2022.

In Kashkadarya region, on the instructions of the regional defense department, 65 young men who had applied for military service were sent to pick cotton. They were told their applications would only be accepted after they had gone to Karshi district to pick cotton. After a local activist spoke to the forced pickers, all men were returned from the fields on October 5 following an intervention by military officials.

Beginning in the second half of October, employees of medical institutions in Uchkuprik district and kindergartens in the Furkat district of Ferghana region, as well as the Kegeyli district of Karakalpakstan, said that they were told by their supervisors either to pick cotton on weekends or to pay money to hire replacement pickers.

An audio recording was circulated on social media in which the head of a kindergarten in Furkat district is heard explaining that the hokim had ordered employees to either pick cotton or pay for replacement pickers. "If there are 23 people working in the kindergarten, it means that 23 pickers must be found to pick cotton," said head of the kindergarten. Employees were told that everyone without exception had to go to the fields on weekends or hire someone else instead.

In Kashkadarya region, employees of the police force, banks, the tax inspectorate, and large enterprises such as the electricity and gas companies recruited cotton pickers to send to the fields in their place. In Kasan district, government officials were advised to hire pickers from among their acquaintances rather than people they did not know to prevent the information from being made public. Possibly for the same reason, a police officer in Kasan district, who paid 100,000 soums (approximately \$9) a day to a replacement picker, told an Uzbek Forum monitor that he was doing so voluntarily to assist the district in picking cotton before the onset of cold weather.

Although cases of coercion – mainly of employees of state organizations – have been identified, it is difficult to estimate the scale as it is unknown how many days employees spent on the fields. Efforts to coerce people into going to the fields also appear to stop as soon as the information becomes public. This is a positive indicator that the authorities are paying attention to public opinion but raises the question of why measures to prevent coercion and extortion are still not being effectively implemented.

The Situation of Farmers

Uzbek Forum for Human Rights has repeatedly highlighted the vulnerable position and exploitation of Uzbek cotton farmers since the privatization process began.

During the 2022 harvest, there appear to have been no major improvements despite legislation by the government intended to protect the rights of farmers. According to media reports and initial findings by Uzbek Forum monitors, farmers continue to be at risk of illegal land confiscations and exploitative contracts with cotton clusters.

Forced Cultivation of Cotton Continues

Farmers still have no freedom to choose what agricultural products they cultivate. The government retains the system of land allocation which determines the amount of land that is allocated for the cultivation of crops, fruit and vegetables. The land allocation for cotton in 2022 was approximately one million hectares.

The land that farmers lease from the state comes with pre-determined production quotas, set by the state, for different agricultural products which farmers are obliged to grow. Many farmers complain they are given quotas for producing cotton, even when their land is not suitable due to soil quality and/or a lack of available water. In addition, they claim that they are given unrealistically high cotton quotas which creates enormous pressure given that failure to fulfill quotas can result in the loss of their land leases. Many farmers are naturally more incentivized to grow products other than cotton that would bring them more income and a greater degree of autonomy. In effect, farmers are being forced to provide the means of production for private cotton textile companies.

Contracts

In 2022, thousands of farmers were forced to sign blank contracts with no guaranteed minimum price, but often with inflated production targets. In many cases, clusters also refused to give farmers copies of their contracts. Most farmers who spoke to Uzbek Forum confirmed they did not know how much the clusters would eventually pay them for the cotton they had been delivering. In many cases, the contracts also did not include yield figures (number of quintals per hectare of land), which is the basis for determining the quota of cotton to be grown, harvested, and brought to the cluster reception points in a timely manner.

Although farmers can in theory conclude contracts with clusters within their region, they face barriers, including harassment from the authorities, when attempting to deliver their cotton to clusters in other districts in the same region. With control over collection points, ginneries, and processing facilities, clusters effectively control the entire harvested cotton in the districts where they operate.

On September 19, 2022, the Farmers' Council of Uzbekistan sent a letter to the Ministry of Agriculture and the General Prosecutor's Office notifying the state authorities that according to a survey conducted among farmers throughout the country, several hundred farmers had confirmed that they did not have copies of cotton production agreements with clusters.

Following a **consultation** with farmers, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Farmers' Council, and representatives of the Cluster Association, the Ministry of Justice developed a sample futures contract between cotton-textile clusters and farms for growing and supplying raw cotton which guaranteed a minimum purchase price for cotton. This was considered a landmark achievement that would improve the livelihoods of farmers and protect them from abusive clusters. It appears however, that many clusters have simply refused to accept or use the proposed futures contracts.

Akbarjon Abdullajonov, a farmer in Uchkuprik district in Fergana region, said in an **interview** with the media outlet Kun.uz that he had signed a blank contract with the Fergana Global Textile cluster. After the cluster failed to pay him the agreed 10% of pre-financing to prepare for the harvest, he decided to grow cotton using his own money. He said, "I took

the ripe cotton to the cluster in accordance with the contract. At the receiving point they deducted too much cotton. I disagreed and took the cotton back. Then a policeman came to my house and told me to take the cotton to the cluster. I returned the cotton to the cluster under pressure and the pressure continues.”

Farmers cited intimidation from the Ministry of Interior and local officials as the reason for signing blank contracts. “After representatives from internal affairs come to your house, your health suffers. You give up everything to get rid of the pressure”, said Abdullajonov. When asked if farmers understand that these activities are illegal, he replied, “We know. But we are afraid.”

Another farmer in Uchkuprik, Dilsora Umrzokova, concluded a contract with Fergana Global Textile cluster to deliver 120 tons of cotton. She says she exceeded the target and delivered 123 tons but was then told that because she had planted 54 hectares with cotton, she therefore had to produce 161 tons. “They are asking me to sell cotton in excess of the tonnage specified in my contract. With these actions, they are destroying the faith of us farmers in our president! We don’t know who to trust.“

Illegal Land Confiscations

The practice of illegally terminating land lease agreements under threat of penalty has been well **documented** by Uzbek Forum and Uzbek media over the last few years. Although some efforts have been made by the authorities to address the issue, the practice continues, depriving farmers of their livelihoods and compensation. In most of the cases, the land is taken back into the state reserve and in many cases been **allocated to clusters**.

On September 27, 2022, the Head of the Presidential Administration, Sardor Umurzakov, dismissed Mansurbek Alikhano, the hokim of Asaka district in Andijan region, Mansurbek Alikhano and Shuhratjon Mominov, the hokim of Ferghana, along with district officials for carrying out illegal land confiscations. But despite these ad hoc interventions by high-ranking government officials which attract a high degree of public attention, illegal land confiscations continue with impunity.

In August 2022, Ziyodilla Davlatov, the hokim of Sherabad district in Surkhandarya region, detained dozens of farmers who had not fulfilled their contracts with the local cluster and forced them to write applications to “voluntarily” terminate their land leases. According to the media outlet **Ozodlik**, Shuhrat Khojanov, the deputy hokim of Sherabad district, could not explain why the farmers had simultaneously written applications to give up their land.

Jamshid Rajabov, the head of a farm in Sherabad district, said that in the middle of August, the district hokim forced the farmers to sign an application to transfer their land to the state reserve. He told **Ozodlik**, “The mayor called all the farmers to the mayor’s office. The mayor was flanked by the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the prosecutor. He called on each farmer in the region and asked if they had fulfilled the grain plan or not”. Although farmers had legitimate reasons for being unable to fulfill their quotas because of lack of water or pesticides, they were presented with applications to terminate their land leases.

On October 13, 2022, some 80 farmers in Uchkuprik district in Ferghana region were ordered to attend a meeting at the offices of the local administration and the prosecutor. The farmers were escorted by police officers and locked in the building where they were forced to sign pre-prepared applications to terminate their land leases for failure to meet their production targets. The applications contained the statement “I hand over my land of



October 2022 , Uchkuprik district hokimiyat where farmers were forced to “voluntarily” give up their land . Poster : “The new Uzbekistan values the nation and its people” . © Uzbek Forum

my own free will”, thereby essentially removing any claims to compensation for loss of land and earnings. According to [media reports](#), similar cases are being observed throughout the Ferghana region.

Following media reports on the incident, the Ministry of Justice issued a statement on October 13 confirming that the applications of 16 of the farmers to “voluntarily” terminate their land leases had been obtained in violation of procedures and the applications were subsequently cancelled.

Some clusters that are now conducting “direct” farming on land obtained via “voluntary” land lease terminations, are apparently facing challenges to improve or even achieve the yields formerly achieved by the farmers from whom the land was taken. Farmers in Nishon district in Kashkadarya region complain of the poor management of the land by Indorama Agro. Many of the fields are full of weeds and thorns and farmers say they want their land back so that they can manage it properly.

Cooperatives

Under Uzbek law, farms have the right, to voluntarily unite, join cooperatives, societies, unions and other associations for the production, procurement, processing, and marketing of their products.

[According to Mukhtar Umarov](#), the Chairman of the Assembly of Economy of Uzbekistan, 30 farmers’ cooperatives have been established in several districts in an attempt to secure more autonomy and collectively protect farmers’ interests. These initiatives are facing pressure from the authorities who are actively hindering them from operating.

In Surkhandarya and Ferghana regions, farmers have [formed cooperatives](#), using their own money to grow cotton. However, in violation of the law, hokims are forcing the farmers to

surrender their cotton to the district clusters. The farmers have refused to sell to these clusters because in Surkhandarya they have not yet received full payment for this year's grain and in Ferghana, farmers were only able to get full payment for their 2021 cotton harvest after obtaining a court order. According to the farmers in Jarkurgan, the district hokim and the prosecutor of Surkhandarya region stopped the cotton harvest in the fields of their cooperative until the farmers agreed to surrender their cotton to the local cluster.

In Uchkuprik district of Ferghana region, 19 farmers formed a cooperative. The authorities prevented them from storing their cotton in a warehouse and threatened to take their cotton to another warehouse belonging to the local cluster.

According to the media outlet [Kun.uz](#), the situation for cooperatives in Zharkurgan district in Surkhandarya region is almost identical to the one in Uchkuprik district. As soon as cotton has been harvested, the cooperatives were prevented from storing their cotton and forced to deliver it to a particular cluster. [Comments offered to Kun.uz](#) by Usman Turopov, the deputy hokim of Surkhandarya region, and Abrorjon Askarov, the hokim of Uchkuprik district, revealed that the officials were either unaware of the legal rights of cooperatives or knowingly ignored them.



Farmer Ne'mat Ishchanov who established a cooperative in Shovot district , Khorezm region , August 2022 . © Uzbek Forum

Cooperatives also suffer from an unfair competitive advantage, given that preferential loans are only available to clusters. This means that cooperatives have to finance their business from their own pockets or, alternatively, bind themselves to a cluster in order to access funding. High interest loans from commercial banks disproportionately add to production costs, creating higher overall production costs which impact profits. Commercial loans are often not even available to farmers.

As clusters own the facilities for cleaning and processing raw cotton, farmers who wish to sell their cotton independently or outside of the cluster-contract system depend on clusters to use these facilities. When clusters or intervening government officials refuse access, farmers are effectively excluded from the market.



October 2022 , Payarik district , Samarkand region . Farmer Esirgapov Duston's injuries inflicted by police . © Esirgapov Duston

Violence Against Farmers

The pressure on farmers to give up their land, sign exploitative blank contracts or deliver their cotton to a cluster not of their choosing has been so intense that it has even culminated in appalling violence.

On September 28, farmer Esirgapov Duston brought three trailer-loads of cotton to the Payarik Cluster LLC in Payarik district in Samarkand region. He was told by the laboratory there that his cotton was only second grade for which he would receive a lower price. The farmer disagreed and decided to take his cotton back to clean it and return it to the cluster at a higher grade. Esirgapov said, "I took the cotton to my brother's house, also a farmer. At midnight on September 28, police officers came to his house and ordered him to immediately hand the cotton over to Payarik cluster." His brother refused and the police left the premises after making further insults and threats. However, the police returned an hour later with a tractor and forcibly removed two trailers of cotton. The farmers then went to the the Chelak Cotton Receiving Point which belongs to the Payarik cluster to retrieve their cotton. There, at 3 am, they were met by police officers who beat them so severely that Esirgapov was left unconscious and had to be taken to hospital where he regained consciousness the next day.

Legislation

Since privatization began, new legislation has come into force to address some of the injustices and issues facing farmers. It appears however, that this legislation is either often not applied at all and simply ignored, or at best applied unevenly.

A **presidential decree** “On measures to ensure equality and transparency in land relations, reliable protection of rights to land and their transformation into a market asset”, of June 8, 2002, effectively ended the decision-making powers of district officials to take back farmers’ land into the state reserve. However, local officials retain their positions as chairmen of the District Council of People’s Deputies, which ultimately has the decision-making powers to seize land from farmers. District hokims therefore retain significant levels of influence in the distribution of land.

A **presidential decree** that took effect on August 25, 2022, stipulates that an application for voluntary land lease terminations can only be approved through a notarial procedure and the right to a land lease cannot be revoked by a decision of the local authorities. The notary is required to ensure that the farmer actually wrote the application voluntarily and that it was not signed under duress. Following publicity of the case of the 80 farmers in Uchkuprik, the Ministry of Justice issued a **press-release** via Telegram in which it gave a legal assessment of the actions of the notary who had approved the applications. It found that in the case of 16 farmers, the notary had not ensured that the applications were written voluntarily and subsequently annulled them.

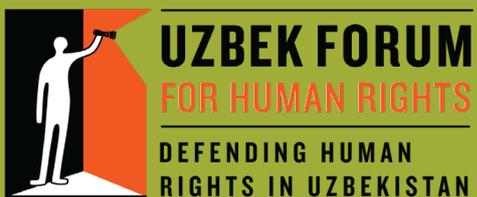
Preliminary Conclusions

These preliminary findings suggest that despite considerable progress in eliminating government-imposed forced labor in the cotton fields, there remain serious gaps in the implementation of laws designed to protect workers and farmers. The impunity of local authorities who unilaterally seize land from farmers and force people to go to the fields, or pay for others to go in their place, poses serious concerns for companies considering sourcing Uzbek cotton but are bound by ethical codes of conduct.

Despite numerous commitments by high-ranking officials and assurances about the unacceptability of child and forced labor, the strict daily monitoring of the cotton harvest by government officials in Tashkent leads to fear of punishment among local hokims who struggle to fulfill production targets. This increases the likelihood that they will resort to the use of coercion to improve the cotton harvest performance in their districts.

Independent civil society groups with the resources to conduct independent monitoring of the harvest are crucial to holding the government to account and ensuring the public is made aware of rights violations in Uzbekistan’s cotton sector. These groups are conspicuous by their absence due to persistent restrictions on NGO registration and prohibitive regulations on funding. An enabling environment for civil society is key to sustaining the progress made to date and preventing coercive practices throughout the sector.

Uzbek Forum continues to conduct monitoring while the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan progresses.



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Cover Photo: Farmer Ne'mat Ishchanov Ne'mat, Khorezm region, August 2022 ©Uzbek Forum