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TRANSCRIPT

"FORCED STERILIZATION AND FORCED LABOR IN UZBEKISTAN"

A Conversation With Natalia Antelava and Matt Fischer-Daly

Moderator: Justin Burke

ANNOUNCER:

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JUSTIN BURKE:

I'd like to welcome everyone here to the Open Society Foundations tonight. My name is Justin Burke. I'm the editor of the news website, Eurasia Net, which is an operating program of the Open Society Foundations. And-- we're here for-- a talk that will focus on two-- papers-- one on forced sterilization, women in Uzbekistan and the other on Cotton Campaign. Watchdog groups, including Human Rights Watch, Freedom House and Transparency International have described Uzbekistan as one of the more-- repressive and corrupt regimes on the planet. And we are here tonight to examine two aspects of state coercion.

With us tonight is Natalia Antelava, the author of the forced sterilization report. Natalia is a BBC correspondent. She's currently based in Delhi, but has extensive experience in the-- in the Caucasus and central Asia. And-- we also have-- we also welcome tonight-- Matt-- Fischer-- Fischer-Daly, who is the coordinator of the Cotton Campaign and he'll talk about the campaigns activity and the paper.

The Cotton Campaign-- for all-- who may not-- be aware is a broad-based coalition-- bringing together-- NGO activists-- entrepreneurs, investors and businesses-- all in the name of trying to end forced labor, especially forced labor of-- children in Uzbekistan. So tonight, both Natalia and Matt will speak for about 15 minutes or so

and then will open it up to questions. So I-- I think we'll start with Natalia.

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

Yeah, sure. Sure. Thank you very much for having me and for the introduction and-- thanks a lot for coming. I think-- and I'm sure Matt will-- sort of talk about-- similar things, but I think one thing that-- some of you probably know, it was very important to keep in mind when-- talking or reading about Uzbekistan is that no matter what you do that's related to Uzbekistan, whether it's actually in Uzbekistan or outside Uzbekistan, as long as you're speaking to Uzbeks, you always come across this and wall of fear.

And it's really, really difficult to penetrate it. It's really difficult to-- get past it and actually find out what really is going on. So-- the-- the forced sterilization is something that I've been interested in for a long time-- during my time as a correspondent for the BBC in central Asia. And at the time, there was some quite good journalism that was coming out of the region. Uzbekistan was still not entirely closed. It was already seriously closing down, but it wasn't entirely closed.

And-- and-- there was-- there were some good reports that were, you know, dealt with the subject. In 2011-- after-- having left the region, I convinced my editors that it was a good idea for me to go to Uzbekistan and try to do-- try to make more that sort of focused look at the-- just at this sterilization, do a documentary about it. So I flew to Tashkent and unfortunately, the Uzbek government didn't think it was such a good idea for me to come to Uzbekistan, so they asked me, not very politely, to leave.

So I got-- deported-- went to Kazakhstan instead. And-- this is-- you know, a bit of a background, but I think a very-- very telling part of the story. I, you know, spent a long time in Kazakhstan talking to people-- to Uzbeks and there are plenty of Uzbeks in Kazakhstan-- who have come to Almaty. And then myself and the BBC, one of my colleagues from Kazakh side of the BBC, we went to the Kazakh-Uzbek border and basically parked ourselves at the border for a few weeks and-- hung out.

And that turned out to be the best way of getting stories. But it was incredible. We-- we-- sort of quite early on, we attached ourselves to this group of-- Uzbeks and there were about seven women in it and-- a few men. And they were waiting for the rest of their families to come across from Uzbekistan and they were tied in some sort of red tape.

And these guys didn't have enough money-- to go onto Russia. And there were two pregnant women among them, so we thought it would be a good idea to sort of try to find out what their stories are. And we started basically hanging around them and-- it was amazing to see that it took-- it took literally took seven days until these women stopped saying, "What sterilization? You know, no, we never heard of such a thing. Everything-- everything is fine."

And by the end of that week-- the pregnant-- the woman who was pregnant was saying that-- she was leaving Uzbekistan, because she was pregnant, because she was

told by the nurse and the local (UNINTEL), after she had her first baby, that she was not to get pregnant again. And-- she-- and every other woman in the group knew someone who had been sterilized, although none of them, not-- none of them had the operation. And then-- one of the women said to me, you know, "Give-- turn on your camera. Turn on your camera on the phone."

And she-- recorded this message, this video message to her friend and then gave me an address of this woman she called, you know, let's call her Nargis (PH) and said, "Go. Go and see Nargis, who lives now in Kazakhstan and she'll tell you what the real story is." And, you know, having spent two weeks, you know, going back and forth between the border, two-hour drive there, two-hour drive back every day, we went and found Nargis who lived literally next to the hotel where we were staying.

And-- she was the first woman that I met who actually had been-- sterilized. And her story was-- as I subsequently found out, was-- was quite typical. She had a baby. She was-- her pregnancy was normal, but then she was fo-- she-- she had a C-section. And-- during this, she-- she had a very long and difficult recovery after the C-section. And failed to get pregnant again.

So she was trying to get pregnant, failed to get pregnant and finally went to a doctor. And doctor-- the doctor said, "You've had your uterus removed. You can never get pregnant again." She then introduced us to four of her friends who-- had similar stories, although you know, they varied. No-- none of the others had uteruses removed. All of them had fallopian tubes tied.

Some of them were told that it was a reversible procedure. Others didn't even know that-- it was done on them until much later again. So the typical-- the typical story is that the woman gets pregnant-- gives birth then tries to get pregnant again. Fails to get pregnant. Goes to a doctor and finds out that she's had-- she had been ste-- sterilized. What-- the-- the interviews we did-- with tho-- those were then became, you know, the backbone of a radio (UNINTEL) that I did in 2011, which, in turn, became the backbone of the-- the (COUGHING) research of the paper that-- you know, was done with the OSI.

But I think where the paper-- is very interesting and where it really-- (UNINTEL) out and actually creates a real sort of contribution to the understanding of what's happening is that we, for this paper, we have also managed to speak to-- about, you know, 65-- 65 doctors. So-- out of them, about a dozen where actual-- 15 doctors were actually interviewed for, you know, ha-- we had a conversation with.

And we did a survey for that 53 doctors across Uzbekistan, in all 12 regions of Uzbekistan. And-- what's-- become clear as a result of it is that, you know, it-- this sterilization campaign by the government is still carrying on. It's happening everywhere-- across Uzbekistan, so it's not-- it doesn't-- it's not that individual regions are targeted. Rather, it-- you know, across the country, clinics and hospitals are-- are-- performing the procedures.

It hasn't showed any sign of slowing down in the last five years. In fact, sadly, since I did the documentary, I think-- in 2011 and there was quite a big resonance. I think

things have begun worse, because I think the government has clamped down, has become a lot more secretive about it, has put a lot more pressure on doctors to both carry out the procedure and be-- a lot more-- careful with their talking about it to the-- to the outsiders.

So-- so I think it's beyond-- I mean, way (LAUGH)-- you know, every-- and every time some-- you hear the stories, you just-- you just wonder why, you know, it's such a bizarre thing to be doing, to be sterilizing, you know, healthy women-- of your country that are-- that-- that don't want to be sterilized, that want to carry on having children. And I think that's another thing that the paper does. I think it-- we-- we do manage to-- well, there is a lot we still don't know.

And-- there will-- there will be always a lot that we want now, because the government of Uzbekistan says that this is not happening at all. You know, I think we-- we have managed to find enough of government decrease and-- track down actual specific-- orders from the ministry of health and from-- you know, from-- from the president down that create a very-- a pretty comprehensive picture of why-- the program's taking place and-- what's the-- logic behind it, however, you know, you may (UNINTEL) twist it. And-- you know, why it's likely to carry on. So I-- I just don't-- I'm conscious that I don't want to carry on for too long, but I'm sure there will be questions (UNINTEL).

JUSTIN BURKE:

As Natalia mentioned-- OSF, Open Society Foundations was instrumental in-- the publication of this-- study. I just wanted to make that point. I guess now we'll-- we'll move over to-- Matt, who has-- some-- video--

MATT FISCHER-DALY:

Just a couple slides. A couple of slides. But I just wanted to pick up on a couple themes that Natalia mentioned-- this concept of fear and-- how pervasive it is in Uzbekistan and what that means in terms of people-- in a practical sense not being able to exercise their rights. And then the other point about a very centralized chain of command for carrying out nationwide policies.

And those are two features that-- we see in the cotton sector in Uzbekistan. And as-- a thank you, Justin, and OSF for hosting this tonight-- you know, I'm gonna share a bit about the cotton sector in Uzbekistan-- essentially-- the system. It's a forced labor system of cotton production. A bit about this year's cotton harvest, which is the report that-- was recently put out and is both on our website and I think-- Justin has a copy here today-- the harvest just finished a couple weeks ago. So that's a very new report.

But reports have been consistent since at least 2005-- and as Justin mentioned, I coordinate a coalition called the cotton campaign-- which is-- a set of-- yes, NGOs

and trade unions and business associations and investors-- and activists-- around the world that work to end forced labor in Uzbekistan, precisely because it is, in a practical sense, impossible for Uzbek citizens to exercise their rights vis-à-vis their government.

So-- I'll share some key facts and then, you know, we can move onto a discussion. But essentially, the cotton industry in Uzbekistan-- Uzbekistan is the fifth largest exporter of cotton in the world. It has been-- a country with a significant amount of cotton production-- since Soviet-- times, under the Soviet Union, it-- they established, essentially, a mono-culture.

Currently-- about 75% of Uzbekistan's cotton is exported and 25% is-- manufactured-- within Uzbekistan into yarns and-- and fabrics and such. A lot of those exports go primarily to China and Bangladesh. Also some other countries like Russia-- but increasingly to China and Bangladesh. That which is processed inside Uzbekistan-- some of the main companies there are-- the Korean-- conglomerate, Daewoo International - in the Singapore-- company, Interama Corporation.

And as Justin introduced-- this piece, it-- when we're talking about cotton or-- forced sterilization, those are both-- the forced labor in the cotton sector and the forced sterilization-- nationwide are in the context of what is really a horrendous human rights situation in Uzbekistan. The lack of freedoms extend beyond-- forced labor and labor conditions into things like freedom of the press and freedom of association generally.

And one of the key features to keep in mind is so where does all the income from cotton go. You know, there's-- approximate estimation of about a billion dollars annually of income from sales of cotton. And that does not show up in national accounts. It goes into what is called an agricultural fund.

And only the highest-- in the government elite really have access and knowledge about-- that account. And that's-- that's true not only of cotton, but of some other key exports like gold-- in Uzbekistan. But fundamentally, it is-- a state order system and it's underpinned by forced labor. So that-- you know, that is that the government itself-- is orchestrating a forced labor system of production. This means that-- it starts with the farmers.

You see he pictured a farmer-- who I met in 2012 during the cotton harvest. And the way agricultural is set up, the government owns the land and leases land to farmers. And those agreements oblige the farmers to produce a certain amount of cotton every year and to dedicate a percentage of their land to cotton production.

And if you do not meet your cotton quota on an annual basis, the government can give that land to another farmer. So you lose your livelihood if you're a farmer and you fail to meet your quota, right? So what-- how do you get the cotton from the farmers? Yes, the state purchases it-- purchases the cotton. The state procurement price for cotton-- is well below not only world-- cotton prices or US cotton prices, but it's-- it's below the cost of production.

So this means for farmers-- many of them are either going into debt or are risking--

their freedom-- by producing more-- nine cotton crops and selling those crops in order to, you know, provide for their families or they're emigrating-- which means that-- the agricultural society in Uzbekistan is losing a lot of its-- expertise. And in some of the very worst cases, particularly the last few years, we've seen a number of suicides by Uzbek farmers who are just desperate.

What you see pictured on the other side of this slide here-- that is a letter from one of the regional prosecutor's offices. And it's confirming the opening of a criminal case against farmers who planted vegetables instead of cotton. And it requests security support from the district head of police. So if farmers are paid below cost, you know, who's harvesting the cotton? Annually, the government-- coercively mobilizes-- over a million children and adults to go pick cotton-- in the fields.

So-- in terms of the children-- historically, that meant all schools nationwide were shut down and the children went out to pick cotton. In the last couple years, there has been a slight shift, so that-- young schoolchildren under age 15-- have not been mobilized nationwide. However-- most 15 to 17-year-old children and some as young as 11 continue to be sent out to the cotton fields-- across the country. And we saw this in 2013-- essentially, the young students, children, are given the option to go pick cotton-- pay for an-- exemption or face-- threat of expulsion from school.

And those exemptions-- ranged from-- you know, $250 to-- $400, which may not sound like a lot, but keeping in mind that-- per capita annual income is around $1700 or-- a teacher-- in Uzbekistan makes somewhere around-- $250 a month. So it's a rather large sum. And in terms of these-- threats, they are-- they're very real-- what you see pictured next to this-- young woman in the photo is a statement that students and parents were obliged to sign before this year and the 2012 cotton harvest.

In 2012, but even more so in 2013, one of the biggest changes we saw was that the government took extensive measures to hide the forced aspect of the mobilization and present an image of voluntary participation in the cotton sector. So that statement reads-- you know, translated that-- I-- my name-- so I, Matt, a student, of course, number 101 agree to obey all the internal rules and regulations of the college and attend all the classes.

I also agree to participate in cotton harvesting, the national wealth of our nation and sincerely fulfill my duty to my country, my nation, my family. Goes on another couple sentences and says, "If I do not fulfill my above-mentioned promise, I agree to be left to retake the course and be penalized by all means showed in the law."

So we've seen in the last few years that these threats are very real-- in fact, this year in September-- a young student-- named Barhayote-- Tarayev (PH), 16 years old-- refused to pick cotton and he was expelled from his school. In 2012, there were university officials that went on record, stating that indeed-- it is policy that students are expelled if they don't pick cotton. So as mentioned-- before-- authorities send adults as well as children. And this includes-- not just the farmers, but it also includes public sector workers-- and in Uzbekistan, that means teachers, doctors,

nurses-- military personnel, et cetera.

It also includes the private sector-- a couple of companies involved-- this year, that is, that we're pressured to send either-- employees to work and/or financial contributions-- included-- Shertanaf Gas (PH), which is a gas company, Trust Bank, a bank, and GM Uzbekistan, which is a joint venture between the Uzbek government and General Motors. And similar to the students-- the government uses significant coercion to get the adults to go out and pick cotton.

What does that mean? It means if you're-- a public sector worker, your job is conditioned on your participation in the cotton harvest. In fact, they introduce into public sector contracts a clause that you will participate-- and you have to sign that in order to maintain your job. You can also lose your salary, for example, as another means of-- of-- punishment.

So how does the-- how is the harvest managed? Getting back to this idea of a centralized chain of command-- in the springtime every year, at the national level, a national production target is set. And that is then divided up by regions and regional governors-- have a responsibility for meeting their regional-- production target.

So then they work with the district level-- heads of admini-- of-- government agencies-- and with those who oversee businesses to then-- establish quotas at the individual level. So this year-- the individual quota for picking cotton in a day was around 50 kilograms. It varies from a little bit more than that during the beginning of the harvest to a little bit less than that at the end of the harvest.

However, a lot of people, particularly when you have children and-- young folks out there doing the work, had difficulties meeting that quota, so they end up having to pay local folks to help 'em out-- or otherwise contribute their own income-- and they end up paying money in addition to giving their labor to the government system of production. So real quickly, because-- you know, I want to get onto discussion.

It's important to keep in mind. Cotton-picking is not something any of us want to do. It's hazardous-- in addition to facing the natural elements, you know, you're-- you're bent over for the vast majority of the day. People work in-- on average about 10 hours a day. The way the system is set up in Uzbekistan, a lot of people are sent far away from their homes, so they stay in accommodations that the government provides, which are often-- unsanitary and don't have adequate conditions.

There's also the significant health risk of-- agro chemicals, which getting back to this transparency issue, it's very difficult to understand what level of chemicals is used, but we have seen trucks spraying chemicals on fields while-- children and adults are working. Very sadly, this year was one of the most-- tragic cotton harvests on record. At least 11 people-- were-- died as a result of this forced labor system of production.

These are their names here. Our report goes into further detail in each of their-- cases. But really, you know, it-- it indicates how people are considered in terms of in input for this cotton production system. So what to do about it? That's where-- the cotton campaign came about. And this year, for the first time-- the international labor organization, which is the United Nations agency with a mandate to oversee

labor conditions around the world.

For the first time, they had monitors in Uzbekistan. For several years now-- workers and employers at the international level had been calling for a very specific, independent and unfettered access monitoring mission. Unfortunately, this year-- there's a very circumscribed scope for the monitors and the government-- did-- accompany the monitors everywhere they went-- which gets back to this question of fear. It's very difficult to gather information from Uzbek citizens if the government is present.

So the big question remains if this is the start of a process of reform or not. And truly that, you know, the answer to that question lies in-- in Tashkent. We don't-- we won't know until the government starts to signal-- what their plans are. That ILO missions report will come out-- the first quarter of 2014, so in the next few months.

But so far, the signals are not very good. The Uzbek government has continued to deny the problem. And in fact, throughout the harvest, they continued to harass Uzbek citizens that were documenting and-- and reporting out on what was happening. Three individuals in particular-- one was-- arrested, detained-- held incommunicado for 12 days. Another-- was sentenced to four years in prison during the harvest. And the third was placed under house arrest so he couldn't monitor and report the way he had in years past.

So what will it take? These are the cases that are mentioned. When you look at-- you know, 2013, there are international monitors. And things looked very much the way they did in years past. This really raises the question of-- incentives. To truly end forced labor of children and adults in Uzbekistan, it will require-- reducing the incentives for the government to continue the practice, right?

So what you see here is-- a demonstrative map of the flow of Uzbek cotton. The blue are the Uzbek government-controlled firms. The green are Uzbek-- Uzbekistan-based firms-- that partner with the Uzbek government to buy cotton and process it in country. And then, you know, export yarn or fabrics, things of that nature. And the yellow are companies that are supporting by doing business with Uzbek cotton, so cotton traders and apparel companies, et cetera.

And so that brings in some of the work that the cotton campaign does. You know, when you look at the apparel industry and that's the industry that uses the most cotton in the world, so Uzbekistan, fifth largest exporter of cotton that goes to China, goes to Bangladesh, makes its way into apparel supply chains. Currently most apparel companies do not have supply chains that are chi-- transparent enough to know where the cotton came from, right? That's just the way they're structured. There are probably five to six companies between the brand or retail company that we recognize and the-- spinning factory, which is the last point in that supply chain that knows the country of origin of cotton.

So we as-- a campaign, as a coalition-- we have been calling on companies based in Uzbekistan to meet their, you know, basic human rights due diligence by-- monitoring and-- insuring that they don't buy cotton from forced labor. That is,

don't buy cotton until the-- the system has ended. And in terms of the brands and retailers worldwide, it's, you know, a no forced labor-- cotton that is no Uzbek cotton until the system is reformed.

And I can get into further details on that in-- in discussion. There is also a significant role for governments. Number one, a lot of governments have bilateral relationships with Uzbekistan. Certainly the United States does. Certainly the European Union does-- other big countries, Russia, China, Bangladesh for trade.

We as-- a coalition do a lot of engagement and advocacy-- both in Washington and in Brussels. And essentially, we're asking to use your-- bilateral relationship to keep ending forced labor on the agenda when you meet with the Uzbek government-- but also to enforce laws that prohibit trade with goods that are made in-- with forced labor or child labor. And a couple-- you see a couple examples of those type of trade regulations, the terra fact, the generalized system of preferences for trade.

There's also the role for countries like the United States-- European Union member states and other members of the OUCD, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, to ensure that their companies are meeting-- human rights due diligence when they're working in Uzbekistan or any other country, for that matter. But that means essentially knowing-- what risks to human rights violations there are, monitoring for any violations of human rights in your own operations and in your supply chain and remediating when there are violations that are identified. So thank you and with that, I think it's probably good for discussion.

JUSTIN BURKE:

All right, Natalia, Matt. Thank you very much. Before I turn-- turn it over to the floor for questions, I'm going to assert the moderator's prerogative of asking a question. Natalia-- when it comes to forced sterilization, what is the government's motivation? What's in it for the government to force doctors to-- to perform these procedures? Is Uzbekistan facing a demographic situation like China where they need to reduce the population in, say, the Fergana Valley? Can Uzbekistan feed itself? What are-- what are the factors that go into this?

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

Well, the economy-- the economy and the population are definitely some key factors. You know, at least, they're-- they're the reasons. They're the reasons why-- why this is being done. And you know, the health officials that I have spoken, to be honest, I had spoken to one-- source at the health ministry and-- and some senior doctors. They say, "Look, we have tried. We have tried all other ways. We've tried-- all other ways of birth control and it doesn't work. The women won't take it. The families won't accept it. This is the only way of doing it."

The problem is that, like with everything else in Uzbekistan, you can't really know

what the real numbers are, so we don't even know what the real-- you know, what the population of Uzbekistan is. They-- they haven't had a census for years and years. They-- you know, they-- the figures are massaged-- you know, so much that by the time you get them here, they're completely untrustworthy.

So-- but-- but the conventionally accepted sort of fact is-- you know, Uzbekistan is the most populous country in central Asia. Its population is growing very fast. It can create-- you know-- Islam Karimov, the president, wants to control the population. And this is-- he has tried to control the population through other means. And you know, this is the only way that they can do it successfully.

But I think one important thing to keep in mind is that, you know, there is-- there-- it's very clear that there are certain quotas on the number of sterilization that doctors perform. But-- it's very difficult to trace these quotas up the whole way up to Tashkent. So while the country is extremely centralized, it also-- there's also real sense of competition between, you know, lower-- lower down the chain of command between the local bureaucrats, local hospitals, local doctors to outperform each other.

So you know, we don't know whether the quota was set at, you know, Fergana Valley has to turn in, you know-- 7000 sterilizations a month. It's not-- there is-- there is no piece of paper that says that. Those orders, from what we understand, I passed on orally, but then, you know, the people who get those orders try very hard to please, you know, their bosses and, you know-- you know, I want to be the running-- running a hospital that does, you know, more sterilizations than big hospital next door.

And-- the interesting thing is that a lot of docs that I've spoken to actually believe that this is the right thing to be doing, because they say, "Look, otherwise-- these women want to start having children. And it's bad for their health and it's bad for their-- it's-- it's bad for the economy. It's bad for the-- for-- for the society as a whole." And so on. So-- there are quite a few who disagree with it and have a real problem with it, but there are also many who do not have a problem doing it.

JUSTIN BURKE:

Thank you. So-- I will work this way over here. Yes, so--

TARU BUDA:

Hi. I have a question that--

JUSTIN BURKE:

If you could identify yourself, please.

TARU BUDA:

Oh, okay. My name is Taru Buda (PH). I'm an American documentary filmmaker, but I live in Bangkok. I know that Uzbekistan has some of the highest-- sort of a two-part question. I know that Uzbekistan has some of the highest incidence of domestic violence in the world and I was wondering how the husbands, if they're involved in the sterilization, are they giving permission to the doctors--

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

You know, I'd be really-- I'd be really interested to find out where the numbers of the highest domestic violence come from, because again, as we build statistics, there is, you know, I-- I-- and with-- you know, considering how close the society is, I would be very skeptical about, you know, the-- about that-- that-- the figures, whatever the figures--

TARU BUDA:

Do you disagree with--

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

I don't know. I don't know, because it's not something that people will openly talk to and I-- I imagine what-- the only thing I know is that it would be impossible, the way things are in Uzbekistan, it would be completely impossible right now to measure-- domestic violence.

TARU BUDA:

It's actually in Lonely Planet. I know that's--

(OVERTALK)

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

I know. I'm not sure Lonely Planet-- yeah

TARU BUDA:

I was in Uzbekistan in 2012 and I was interviewing a lot of young women and-- you know, it took me a while for them to speak to me, but most people-- most of the women that I spoke to were either being abused by their fathers or their husband.

Yeah, so--

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

No-- I-- I have no doubt that there are high levels of domestic violence in Uzbekistan, but I would be very cautious--

(OVERTALK)

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

--about saying that it's the-- that it's the highest. You know, I don't think there's any way of-- sort of saying it's higher than, say, in India, but-- but in terms of what-- it's a very good question. I think-- right now, in order to perform a sterilization, they need a consent of either the patient or the-- or a partner and they will often-- but they-- people are very, very negative about it. I mean, an Uzbek men will never-- I'm sure there are exceptions to every-- every rule, but-- family's a huge deal in central Asia in general and Uzbekistan in particular and children-- you know, are-- the number of children you have are basically a measure of your success for both men and women.

And-- to-- to lose an ability to bear a child is a huge deal for the entire family, for both men and women. So they-- the men that I have spoken with are just as angry as women about what has happened, but there have also been cases of men leaving-- the wives who have been sterilized, because in-- in many cases, you know, it's not just-- I mean, it's quite a simple procedure and sort of-- it's laparoscopic procedure where your tubes are tied, but it's not-- it's often not being performed properly.

A lot of these women that have been-- have subsequent problems and have problems and there are lots of examples. And in the report, there are a few quite heartbreaking examples of basically completely ruined lives because-- of the procedure, for both men and women.

TARU BUDA:

Okay, real quick. Second part of the question is-- I see a lot-- I worked with human trafficking in southeast Asia and there's a lot of Uzbek women that are working in prostitution in Bangkok. Some of them are there voluntarily, but some of them have been trafficked there. So-- just-- just out of curiosity, do you ever get involved at all in-- in the human trafficking and the sex industry--

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

I've done a lot of human trafficking stuff, but never in central Asia, so--

TARU BUDA:

'Cause it's really a big--

(OVERTALK)

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

So I mean, it's-- it's a huge-- there are a lot of Uzbek women in-- in Thailand and-- and a lot of, you know, and there are lots of-- I-- there's a lot of prostitution in Uzbekistan as well. Uzbekistan-- someone was telling me recently that-- I live in Delhi. And-- recently Uzbekistan has-- became the number one destination for sort of mid-level business men for weekend trips for belly-dancing clubs and so on. And a lot of girls (UNINTEL), so.

JUSTIN BURKE:

Okay, we'll go over here, please.

MALE VOICE:

Regarding the-- forced labor-- could you tell us how-- how long the-- harvesting-- is or how-- what's the obligation of the-- forced labor? How many weeks-- months? Second thing is-- Uzbekistan is a pretty large country and-- what areas of Uzbekistan-- grow cotton? Is it the Fergana Valley or is it-- some areas are desert areas, so they-- obviously they can't grow cotton. So can you just outline the areas where they-- where cotton is grown and--?

MALE VOICE:

This is Uzbekistan.

MATT FISCHER-DALY:

Sure. Both good questions. So on the length-- the harvest-- typically starts the end of August or beginning of September and runs till the end of October, beginning of November. So this year, for example, it was more or less from the 6th of October until about the 15th of-- November.

In terms of the people who are sent to pick cotton-- it varies a bit. Most of the-- the teenagers-- 15, 16, 17-year-olds and university students, are sent for anywhere from-- you know, a month to two months. So essentially the whole harvest.

The adults, and particularly the public sector workers, are usually set in shifts. So, for

example-- some doctors that-- we've interviewed, they described how their hospital would have teams of, you know-- half the staff would go for 10 days, return, and the other-- group of staff would go for the next 10 days. So they'd go in-- in shifts like that. So it varies a bit on the-- on the timing.

The issue of-- where Uzbekistan grows cotton is-- is an interesting and-- question on multiple levels, because part of this desertification that you mentioned, it was not always a desert. So it's, you know, historically steppe lands. And-- one of the biggest tragedies is in fact the mono (?) culture of cotton contributed significantly to deser-- desiccation of the Aral Sea. You know, in the last 50 years the Aral Sea has-- is now 20% of what it was 50 years ago.

And so a large aspect particularly of the northwestern section of Uzbekistan now very much looks like desert. But it's not only desert. It's-- in fact contaminated soil. What little water is there-- a lot of the fishing has been wiped out. Both soil, water and air-- have significantly high levels of residues from the large amount of chemicals that was used for several decades.

Now it's-- getting back to this-- transparency issue, it's very difficult to know what chemicals are used any longer in the production of cotton-- but there continues to be cotton production in basically every region of Uzbekistan. Just varies how much. So, yes, the Fergana Valley is the most fertile and so there's a lot of production there. But also Jizzakh region is a significant-- producer of-- of cotton. And, you know, we don't have-- documentation of the quotas for each region, to give you that level of detail. But it-- you know, every region there's some-- Fergana, Jis-- Jizzakh or-- Namangan-- are a couple where there's a lot of cotton production.

MALE VOICE:

And-- well-- maybe this is just a-- tall order, but maybe the only way that-- that you would ever-- get a practice-- such as these to end is if they just-- Westernized their economies and just-- if the government simply allowed-- farmland to be privatized-- and-- and then that whole element of-- coercion just-- might end.

But maybe that's the reason it's such a tall order. Is because in Asia you tend to have-- authoritarian governments. I mean even in those nations where-- let's say-- in-- industries are privatized, you still have-- authoritarian governments. I mean just look at-- at Russia. Though I'm not sure just how-- Uzbekistan just-- has-- how it's changed-- since-- the fall of the Iron Curtain.

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

Actually, one-- one-- one difference between-- there's a bit of an overlap with birth control and the cotton, because--

(MALE VOICE: UNINTEL)

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

--one-- one of the stories that I heard quite a lot was-- before they started sterilizing there was a massive campaign of forcing IUDs, which is intra-uterine devices-- the coils, on women. And they would-- during the cotton harvest they would set up little field hospitals and get all the women in and put IUDs in. And-- you know, and for women-- the-- I talked to women who would say, "I was kicking and screaming and--"

MALE VOICE:

Right.

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

--"they still did it." But-- the-- the difference-- one difference between sterilization and-- the cotton harvest, you know, cotton, the forced labor has been part of the Uzbek economy for as long as the cot-- cotton has existed. You know, all the-- everyone who grew up in the Soviet Union or Uzbeks would-- you know, that part of their childhood memories is going often to the cotton harvest.

This is a much more-- and it carried on, and some would argue, became a lot more brutal since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is to address your question about how Uzbekistan has changed. The the sterilization is something that's very new. It didn't exist in the Soviet Union. So-- so it-- if-- if it's changing, it's definitely not changing for the better. So that would be a solution, that one that you suggest, but it's very unlikely.

MATT FISCHER-DALY:

If I may, just one thing to add to that is, you know, thinking long-term of whatever direction the-- the political and economic system goes-- even if it were a privatized farm system, agricultural system, you know, unfortunately forced labor and child labor exists in agriculture worldwide. You know? The-- in the U.S. and other places.

So one of the-- aspects-- that we try to work on is, "Well, who has the influence going forward?" Even if the government pulls back somewhat from its centralized control of the cotton sector and agriculture generally, there's still-- companies that are buying those products and have responsibilities to make sure that their supply chains are meeting what they say to the world about their standards. Right?

So there's-- there's the dual role of-- the government has a significant responsibility to protect the rights of their citizens, but there's also-- a private sector responsibility to ensure that they're not, number one, contributing to any violations but, number two-- avoiding-- their supply chains being part of that. So--

FEMALE VOICE:

My (UNINTEL). UNDP. And my question is to Natalia. It's also-- regarding one of the reasons-- why government has resorted to these gruesome measured of forced sterilization. And one of the reasons mentioned in media and also in some of the reports was-- kind of reason of reducing maternal-- mortality.

And-- I mean if-- if this is the reason-- this is one of the questions, whether it is one of the reasons-- from the government side to do that. And-- and if it is one of the reason, then also-- considering that government is getting-- compliments regarding reducing maternal mortality.

Now, in the contact of-- context of (UNINTEL) developing goals and they are getting close to the 2015, so government has to show some results. Whether-- if it is happening in (UNINTEL), it's the reason. And government is getting benefits, publicly, you know, from outside. From (UNINTEL)-- community because of these-- positive results. Whether international community is kind of looking at the process how government is ensuring that and whether they're-- raising these questions because--

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

I think it's a really-- thanks for bringing it up, because it's a really, really important-- aspect of it. And, yes, you're-- you're absolutely right. And the report, the paper, that I've written, you know, deals-- deals with it at length.

I think what happened in Uzbekistan is that, you know, from-- from about-- from 2005-- Islam Karimov became pariah in the West. And the government was-- you know, from the sanctions, the-- withdrawal of the Americans and the withdrawal of the aid, which started happening much earlier-- and-- and als-- you know, all sorts of-- he was-- he was slagged off on all fronts constantly all the time.

The only area where the Uzbek government received praise was-- maternal-- mortality and-- and health of women. And they clung onto it like there was no tomorrow. You know, it became like the panacea of their troubles. It became the one thing that, you know, they felt they-- they-- they got right.

And-- and I'm completely convinced that you-- you know, you are right. That this became one of the big motivations of sort of achieving these numbers and lowering-- lowering the maternal-- mortality, because if you-- if you read Karimov's speeches over the last-- you know, s-- five, six years, it is striking how often he refers to the international community's praise for Uzbekistan as a country that have managed to lower maternal mortality.

And this is where-- also the international community, you know, the-- all the U.N. agencies that are operating in Uzbekistan, have a massive responsibility-- which they're not meeting at all, because, you know, I have failed, completely failed to talk to UNICEF. UNICEF is running I guess programs in Uzbekistan that deal with

maternal health. They would not respond to any of my, you know, very persistent attempts to speak to them.

Other U.N. agencies did. UNDP did not, but-- either they-- the-- U.N. population fund. And I've spoken to them. And-- and the-- that was the only agency that they-- the representative that I talked to said that he was really concerned about it. About the issue.

All the others-- pretend that it doesn't exist. And-- and I think it's a real shame, considering-- you know, I-- despite the fact that the cotton forced labor is stilly carrying on, the pressure that was put on-- the Uzbek government by the-- by UNICEF and by-- mainly by, you know, the-- the ones that are operating in Uzbekistan, has made some sort of difference. At least made the difference in terms of shaming them.

Whereas with this issue, you know, maternal-- lowering maternal mor-- mortal-- Uzbekistan's success at lowering maternal mor-- mor-- mortality-- sort of remains unquestioned. And I think that's pretty outrageous, that this is when they-- were the-- international agencies on the ground have to step in.

MALE VOICE:

Yeah, as a follow up to the privatization question, I noticed in your slides-- the usual-- international corporate transgressors, ar-- Archer Daniels Midland and Monsanto. And do you have any suggestions on how, you know, we here in the West can-- make some accountability for-- for-- for the-- their-- their behavior.

MATT FISCHER-DALY:

Yeah. In-- so some of the big agricultural firms like the two, Monsanto and ADM and-- are sort of in this area in the category of-- seeds and providing seeds. The biggest actors in Uzbekistan, though-- are probably the cotton traders in terms of-- multinational companies of that size. Of-- for Monsanto size and such.

And-- the biggest challenge there is a complete lack of transparency in commodity trading. And they're difficult to get after and suggest that they be more transparent, because they're mostly privately owned companies. So I'm talking about, like, Cargill. It's Cargill, U.K., for example, that-- has offices in Tashkent and continues to use Uzbek cotton.

And-- one cotton trader-- based in France named Devcot did in fact stop using Uzbek cotton and stated that they will not use it again until there's significant reforms on the ground. And that was after the-- the OECD in France-- recommended that they do that. And state very clearly that if you're trading Uzbek cotton and you're violating OECD guidelines for multinational companies.

So it's-- in terms of consumers it's hard to get after the cotton trading companies, but

where consumers can have a difference in the long-term is by asking the question when-- when you-- purchase clothing, essentially. If that company knows. If, you know, Gap, if American Apparel, wherever it is, knows where their cotton comes from. It-- that simple question would start to push in the right direction to get the cotton traders. 'Cause-- unfortunately, the cotton traders are-- a difficult nut to crack in this one.

JUSTIN BURKE:

I'll go way in the back.

SARAH:

Yeah. Hi. My name's Sarah. I'm a public health worker and a nurse and I lived in Turkmenistan for several-- several years. So my question is sort of within the reference of Turkmenistan, but I think there's a lot of parallels between the two.

For Natalia, is there-- do you see that there's ethnic targeting for the forced sterilization? Like, in Turkmenistan there was national effort to sort of rid the country of Russians, in particular, and other ethnic groups who weren't ethnically Turkmen. Do you see that with the forced sterilization?

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

It's-- I-- it's-- I think the mood is slightly different in Uzbekistan, but-- some groups are definitely a lot more vulnerable than the others. And-- for example, if you're a Roma woman in Uzbekistan-- you know, you have no-- you give birth, you have no chance of not beings sterilized. You know, but most-- I think most Roma women get sterilized.

And I think socioeconomic-- I mean it's hard-- it's hard for me. With-- it's very clear with Romas. Otherwise, it's very hard to sort of make that-- link with particular-- other groups. So I think socioeconomic pay-- plays-- plays a-- clearer role than ethnic-- once you move, like, up from Roma, who are considered, like, the bottom of the society.

But-- interestingly enough, it's the-- probably the opposite with Russians, because Russians and Uzbekistans still tend to leave-- live in-- or by the more developed areas-- tend to have-- tend to be better off economically. So tend to go to better hospitals or be able to pay nurses and-- doctors. So-- are more educated, because a lot of this comes from lack of education as well and lack of questioning of doctors and this hangover of the Soviet medical system, which I'm sure you're familiar with.

And-- there has been a very dramatic rise in C-sections since the-- sterilizations were introduced. And-- I know women who have refused to have C-sections and who have

been-- subsequently saved themselves from being sterilized. But women who don't, and those tend to be poorer women-- but-- but not-- but mostly-- more likely to be Uzbek, actually, than-- than Russian.

PETER CYNET:

I'm Peter Cynet (PH). I know of some women who have-- gone through this in Uzbekistan and they were from the educated class in Tashkent. And this was all done in Sanpi (PH)-- clinic, natal clinic in Tashkent. And I-- I'm wondering if-- if we're-- we're missing-- a factor, and that factor might be the huge level of male out migration in Uzbekistan, which is now-- for quite a while.

For instance, I also know a woman who was a nurse and was trained in teaching-- basically birth-- basic birth control approaches. And she was assigned to do this in a area of Uzbekistan that's somewhat rural. And this-- what she-- happened to her was she was-- attacked by the husbands. Now, given the-- the greater levels of male out migration for labor, you know, I'm wondering if this might be a factor in-- the lack of-- res-- of response by some of the husbands.

And the other point is sort of-- Mr. Fisher-Daly, in the mid '70s a American academic published an article which looked at the production of cotton harvesting machinery. 1960 or '61 to the early '70s. And of course the problem was what impact did that have. As ironic as it would be, I was learning Uzbek and I ended up in a s-- village called Janabeez Arkent (PH) in 1986. And, lo and behold, I stayed in the dormitory for just such a place to train you to repair these machines. Huge diesel engines in classrooms and the like.

But still we-- we have to come to this point. Where is the mechanization? If you looked at a book that would explain in Uzbek the whole process of the wonderful cotton production, you would think back to something in the 1920s in the United States. And that would be in the 1980s. So why are we missing this point?

And the aspect of forced labor, I think there's another point to this. I think there is-- 'cause I know from experience of Uzbeks who have been basically arrested, for whatever reason, on trumped up charges in rural areas, sent to lengthy prison terms and then, lo and behold, after four years in some hellhole, they are given the option of basically living on a very substandard wage and, what do you know, they're involved in a cotton harvest for quite a period of time.

So I-- I'm really wondering about the-- the economic paradox. And as for the pro-- problem of-- the-- domestic violence, this was-- came out in-- USAID funded a report. It's in Uzbek language. Came out-- late '90s. I don't know if Soros-- it might have had the backing of it. I don't know. But-- it doesn't look at things directly. It's always a little bit indirectly. But of course Bulnata Kareemaba (PH). If you investigate her role in how visas for women are obtained, some years back you might find that there was a bit of a monopoly for some places.

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

You may well be right. The-- lack of man has had a huge effect on everything in Uzbekistan, so I'm sure it plays a certain role as well. I don't know how-- given how focused the pressure is on families and on women-- I don't know how much difference. It would have made some difference.

I don't know if it makes it-- I-- if-- if it would make a fundamental difference. I-- I don't-- I don't really-- I can't really imagine sort of all Uzbek men standing up for the rights of their women because-- they're just not standing up for the rights of anybody at the moment.

And-- you know, people are co-- coerced into this-- procedures. And they're forced and they're-- they're threatened. And I've spoken to women who has-- have been-- told that they would lose jobs in state of schools or nurseries. You know, teachers who would-- all the-- the doctor that's-- actually spoken to-- to a female doctor who-- decided to-- be sterilized because she was threatened that she'd lose her job if she wasn't.

And-- and I think there are some women who sort of made this choice and never tell the husbands. And there are certainly women who made the choice because they don't want to have any more children-- too and because their husbands, you know, want to keep having children. There are those-- those cases as well.

But-- I mean given the-- given this-- sort of the-- how-- what role the coercion plays in it in general, I don't know-- I don't know whether having-- I think-- I think Uzbekistan would have been a different country if millions of Uzbeks were not living and working abroad. So I think everything would have been slightly different. So, yes, you are right, but at the same time I think we-- we don't know how different it would be.

MATT FISCHER-DALY:

Yeah, great points on the mechanization and-- you know, I think-- it's-- it's a-- standing question, whether they can move towards mechanization. And in fact this-- during this harvest-- the prime minister made statements to the press saying that in the next few years we're gonna go to 90% of the cotton-- being pro-- cultivated with machines.

Well, you don't really see cotton picking-- harvest combines in Uzbekistan. I mean you see people picking in the fields. It is very much, like-- you know, a century ago in the U.S. or so. So, you know, I think they're a long way off, and that is very much an economic question. It is-- you know-- ahe-- as mentioned, we talk about this with-- U.S. government and European Union governments and such.

And-- and one of those conversations-- a long time central Asia-- person mentioned, you know, you have to think about cotton like-- it's-- it's the blood of the Uzbek political system. So the more-- it's the one economic sector that they have full

control over.

You know, there are-- there are other expert sectors in which folks who are elites in Uzbekistan have significant shares or control. I mean gold and such. But even in those sectors there's often times-- significant influence of-- companies, non-Uzbek companies. You know, foreign direct investment and such.

But in cotton, it is fully controlled by the government. And, you know, it gets back to this control issue. If you mechanize-- that starts to bring into the picture how do you control the farmers and-- you know, it-- it's-- it may be-- a possibility in the future and it will also bring into question the-- potential environmental limits of production as well. So it's--

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

But--

MATT FISCHER-DALY:

--a big question. One quick other point on that is-- what it looks like in the countryside, there's-- you know, there have been some good-- additional studies-- to-- it sounds like some of the work that you've been involved in in the past. Just last year there was-- a scholar named Arnold Zach, who is-- a U.S. scholar, but he spent a good chunk of the '90s and 2000s living in rural Uzbekistan, and put out a book last year that it is useful for folks to check out. It's not really long, but it gives a sense of what it's like to try and make a living as-- as a farmer in Uzbekistan. It's not easy. Sorry.

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

Sorry. I was-- I was just going to add I think I was both the cotton harvest and sterilization, like with so many other things-- and this goes back to the question of wives and-- you know, why-- wha-- why aren't they-- where are the machines.

I-- I think-- you know, it's also important to remember that-- a big part of the Uzbek-- Uzbek state psyche now is that, you know, humiliation is a very useful control tool. And, you know, you don't want to make people's lives easier. You don't want to-- to create good life for people, because-- this is how the Uzbek government controls them. So--

MALE VOICE:

Yeah, I completely agree.

FEMALE VOICE:

I have a question for actually both of you. One thing is the uptick of-- contraception's actually a real interesting question because-- I certainly am not aware of any sort of sex education programs that they have. And that-- at the national level in rural Uzbekistan. Certainly among youth. Not-- not among younger women, newly married women. What I'm finding is that a lot of women are coming in with not really understanding their reproductive health at all.

None thing, though, that's interesting is that people-- women-- older women are interested in-- in contraceptives such as IUDs and sterilization, in fact. Volunteer sterilization in Uzbekistan. But one thing that I was kind of wondering is-- sterilization is actually not such a simple procedure. It does require an incision. It requires general anesthesia. So who's training these providers? And then the second question is also-- and I think you report kind of talks a little bit about this. Is what is the provider attitude about sterilization?

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

What is the provider?

FEMALE VOICE:

Attitudes.

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

Attitudes towards the (UNINTEL PHRASE). I don't know what the training is. The doctors that I've spoken to say that, you know, it's part of the general training, so they-- the surgeons and the-- mid-- I don't know if the midwifes. I don't think midwives do it, but the surgeons do it. So-- it's-- it's something, you know-- nurses definitely don't sterilize in-- in rural clinics. I think forced sterilization, women tends to be taken to-- to bigger hospitals.

In terms of attitudes, as I said, quite a few people that I've spoken to-- are at least not negative about it. They say, "We are-- well, yeah, not ideal, but, you know, they-- there is noth-- nothing else works. They won't use condoms. They won't be on the pill. They-- they will end up--" goes back to the question of sex education, because the government also says that, "Well, we've tried with sex education and, you know, there is a real kind of backlash resistance to it because of the traditional values, the--" and so on.

Which is very-- you know, very hypocritical thing to say considering that, you know, people who have tried, there was a very-- famous-- Uzbek rights activist-- mo-- Maxim Popov, I think, who was imprisoned-- for trying to-- publish a book about--

AIDS education. And he was accused of, you know, going against the traditional Uzbek values and so on.

So it's almost like an entirely-- the-- it's almost like a different sphere. And I know USAID had some sex education programs, but they have been-- they-- they're not-- they no longer do.

So-- so many doctors say-- and this also has to do with sort of the attitude, the general attitude and relationship between a doctor and a physici-- physician and a patient.

In all of the former Soviet Union, and especially in Uzbekistan, where any figure of authority-- like-- in every dictatorship you have lots of little dictators. Right? Anyone who's more important than you is a little dictator. So that's how patients tren-- tend to look at doctors. I mean they do what doctors say, they don't argue and-- doctors-- you know, more often than not, from what I've experienced, treat patients pretty badly.

And-- there is very little respect. There is very little consideration. And they-- you know, they-- they tell them what to do and they expect them to do it. And if they-- you know, do a C-section and then they don't tell them that they will-- also tie their tubes, so be it, because they-- they believe that they are doing it for some sort of a greater cause.

Now, having said that, there are doctors who disagree with it. And-- I mean, you know, if-- I would have never been able to do this survey of, you know, 60 doctors if-- there weren't doctors in the country who were helping me to do it. And these are people who have been trying to do something about it.

And, again, going back to the international organizations issue, the-- those doctors that I've been talking to say that have-- they have tried again and again and again to go to the embassies in Tashkent, to go to the UNDP, UNICEF-- the U.N. Population Fund. They've contacted the American embassy, the Germans, the Brits. Nobody is interested. No one responds. So--

FEMALE VOICE:

Can I ask a question about the cotton? Just-- this-- I was just wondering-- so if-- correct me if I'm in-- if-- if I'm not right, but-- so is-- is the focus of the campaign on child labor or in-- or forced labor? And then if-- if, let's say, the Uzbek government do end child labor, does that mean there's gonna be treproductions-- reper-- repercussions for other groups such as these government workers? Company workers who are forced to go in the field?

MATT FISCHER-DALY:

Yeah, so the campaign's focused on forced labor because the child labor is a symptom

of the forced labor system. So until you can have farmers hiring people, you will continue to have child labor. And-- so they are intertwined. And we've seen that very dramatically the last couple years as the government has taken some steps to-- essentially increase the average age of those forced to pick cotton.

So the schoolchildren of, you know, ages 10 through 14 have not been mobilized as-- wide-- as massively as they had in years past. That does put a bigger burden on those who are over the age of 15. And a big question there is how sustainable that is.

And, you know, the Uzbek government continues to deny that there is either forced or child labor-- but they've act-- actively taken some steps about the child labor issue. The big question is is that-- a way to try and protect themselves from the reforms of the actual production system-- or is that a baby step towards reforms of the system? And we're trying to push it in the lighter direction of being reforms to the system-- which would get at-- adult and child forced labor. Does that make sense?

JUSTIN BURKE:

Okay, I think we have one or-- time for one or two more questions.

KIM VEYWIN:

Kim Veywin (PH) . Environmental law attorney. My question is directed at Matt. Obviously the cotton industry is very important politically and economically for the country, but from what you described about-- the degradation of the river system there and how much it de-- decreased in such a short period of time, it just seems like such an unsustainable agricultural practice in the country. And my question is whether there is any organizations or discourse about alternatives to the cotton industry. Alternative-- agricultural practices or-- other industry practices that might substitute for cotton?

MATT FISCHER-DALY:

Yeah. Yeah. There-- not on-- a significant scale. At least that I'm aware of. I-- personally I think that there ought to be and that's where-- particularly some of the international financial institutions can play a significant role.

And-- there are programs, for example funded by the World Bank or Asian Development Bank or USAID or-- the UKAID, which is the British version of USAID and the-- and German aid agencies that are looking at diversification, but they run into this problem of the control of the agricultural system generally where there are still these percentages of land and quotas for cotton.

So it's-- it's a challenging question, because it-- it gets back to the governmental control over agriculture. Over the long time, yeah, I-- I think if you're going to have--

(LAUGH) I mean for the health of Uzbekistan, yes, diversification is important. Getting there it would-- take some more time, I think, and significant pressure from both those who are working diplomatically, like the governments, but also those who have financial leverage, such as the-- banks that loan to the government like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank.

MICHAEL HALL:

My name's Michael Hall. I work here at-- at Open Society Foundations. A question about-- getting-- about cotton. And this sort of goes into the question about some of the-- the ways in which Western corporations are involved. I-- you know, I don't-- I don't know how it works now, for the-- if it-- if it's a similar (UNINTEL) place.

What it used to be was if someone like Cargill or Reinhardt or whoever wanted to buy cotton, they would go to one of the-- one of a couple of large Western banks to put up the cash with one of these three Uzbek companies that exports cotton. Right? So ABN AMRO or Credit Suisse back then.

The-- the-- so these banks would basically put up the cash to the Uzbek government, to the-- to the cot-- to the Uzbek sellers. The companies would later sort of-- would reimburse them. And I'm wondering-- if that's-- where there-- if they're still in the chain, we still have these Western banks in-- in this chain anywhere, as-- as-- as, you know, underwriters, basically. These purchases. And if so, are they-- are they-- a reasonable target for advocacy?

(MALE VOICE: UNINTEL)

MATT FISCHER-DALY:

It's a great question. And-- yes, that is very much the way a lot of the commodity trade works. And the banks have shied away from playing a significant role, but-- the last few years-- particularly our coalition partners who work in Europe, have engaged a lot of those, because most of the-- trading companies buying Uzbek cotton in the West are based in Europe. There's a lot--

MALE VOICE:

Right.

MATT FISCHER-DALY:

--in Asia. So-- most significant step in that direction was-- BNP Paribas-- did-- take steps to stop financing purchases of what they will publicly say as cotton for central Asia that we can't agree with. (LAUGH) So they put that in their la-- last year's

annual report. And the concept was exactly that. To not fund-- trade of Uzbek cotton. There's-- we would like that to grow from there. Like I said, most banks have-- have been a little bit gun shy.

(MALE VOICE: UNINTEL)

MATT FISCHER-DALY:

The other set of actors in that space-- are the insurers. And-- some of our partners in the U.K. at the moment are working on getting insurers to take the same step. The same-- "We can't insure this. This is a risk for everybody." So-- yeah, it's a great point.

JUSTIN BURKE:

Okay. Now I will use my right as moderate-- moderator one last time before we close because no one has mentioned the magical year of 2014. 2014 is the year and NATO and American forces are in-- due to-- draw down from Afghanistan. Uzbekistan is a major conduit for troops. Or-- actually materielle (PH) going through. That has allowed-- that ha-- that relationship has-- prompted the u-- the United States to more or less turn a blind eye to various-- programs in Uzbekistan that are unsavory. After the withdrawal, does that change at all?

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

If I was making a prediction I would say Uzbekistan's gonna matter even less than it already matters and it will be even harder to put any sort of pressure on anyone and bring these issues to attention. I think that's what's going to happen, because-- it was-- you know, when I did the BBC documentary about sterilization, there was-- you know, there was-- the effort in Washington to-- bring it to attention of Hillary Clinton.

She was-- you know, someone went in and spoke to her about it. (UNINTEL) did a campaign about it. And so on. But, you know, absolutely nothing changed. I'm sure, you know, John Kerry will be even less motivated to have to, you know, guess-- get into it. So that's my not very optimistic--

(OVERTALK)

NATALIA ANTELAVA:

--prediction.

MATT FISCHER-DALY:

Yeah, the--

JUSTIN BURKE:

Final word.

MATT FISCHER-DALY:

I-- I think that's fair. I-- you know, in terms of the U.S. government, it does open up the possibility that they lean harder on the Uzbek government because currently in the last couple years, you know, there's this question mark from the Defense Department or, you know, the Pentagon, essentially, that the harder you lean on Tashkent about human rights issues, the dollar per, you know, train or use of air space keeps going up. So the price of using that network to ship things in and out of Afghanistan goes up. And-- so that's-- that's a very concrete worry throughout the U.S. government. And that worry in some ways goes away.

I actually tend to think, though-- there is a possibility that Uzbekistan will be less important, but I don't think things are gonna change that much in the region. I think there will be continued sort of vying for influence in central Asia-- particularly as-- China, for example, seeks more natural resources in the region. I think that raises a flag to the U.S. and European Union and gives-- at least some possibility that they will continue to engage significantly.

And the security aspect that-- you know, the central Asian region-- including Afghanistan-- to a degree-- is going to be somewhat-- unstable for a while. And Uzbekistan's in a place where the next 10 years will be-- a time of likely change. So-- I-- I tend to think governments will still have their caveats for why they-- don't engage as strongly as some of us human rights advocates would like them to do-- but I still think they're going to be engaged in, you know-- diplomatically and economically in-- in Uzbekistan.

JUSTIN BURKE:

Thank you and that-- brings this-- this talk to a close. I thank you all for coming and-- we look forward to seeing you next time here at the Open Society Foundation. (APPLAUSE)

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