

Slavery on China's plantations

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 set into motion the liberation of slaves from the shackles of forced labor in US cotton plantations. It almost beggars belief that 156 years later, the cotton industry has again become mired in slavery — but this time on another continent, in China's Xinjiang.

The Wall Street Journal in May reported on forced labor in Xinjiang's cotton sector, lifting the lid on the industry's dirty secret and implicating some of the world's largest fashion brands, including H&M, Esprit and Adidas, in modern-day slavery.

More information has since come to light, following a separate investigation by the Australian Broadcasting Corp (ABC) that aired on Nov. 1 suggesting that cotton from forced labor camps in Xinjiang might have been indirectly sourced by Japanese retailers Muji and Uniqlo, as well as Australian branches of IKEA.

The companies identified so far are likely just the tip of the iceberg. China last year produced nearly one-fourth of the world's cotton supply, of which 84 percent came from Xinjiang, the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies said in a report.

Beijing's systematic internment of Uighur Muslims and other Muslim minorities living in the region has been well-documented.

However, US-based Uighur activists on Tuesday released research indicating that the number of imprisoned people might be greater than previous estimates of 1 million, and that nearly 500 camps and prisons have been constructed in the region.

Detainees are forced to learn Mandarin, renounce their faith and swear loyalty to Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平), and many are being held indefinitely. Beijing's "re-education camps" are nothing more than forced labor camps or, more accurately, concentration camps.

Uyghur Human Rights Project chairman Nury Turkel on Oct. 17 testified to the US Congress

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that Uighurs and members of other Turkic ethnic groups were being “swept into a vast system of forced labor,” saying that it is becoming increasingly hard to ignore the fact that goods manufactured in the region have a high likelihood of being produced with forced labor.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute's Nathan Ruser told the ABC: “It's increasingly difficult to separate coercive labor practices in Xinjiang from legitimate sources.”

“Basically, you have a business environment where over 1 million potential employees will be coerced into labor, and a government and business environment that actively encourages firms receiving these workers,” Ruser said. “There is also a lack of any legitimate access to the region — with the coercive social controls in the region, it is impossible to have a frank conversation with factory managers or even employees.”

Evidence of forced labor proves what many observers have long suspected: Beijing is using its concentration camp inmates as a source of cheap labor to sustain its cotton industry.

What can be done to combat this abhorrent situation? First, businesses should be conducting due diligence to ensure that cotton produced by slave labor does not end up in their supply chains. It is simply not good enough for Western or Japanese corporations to hide behind subcontractors and third-party auditors to create plausible deniability.

Second, consumer power is key. Consumers must vote with their feet and boycott companies that continue to sell items produced by forced labor.

Xinjiang's “cotton gulags” are not just a stain on China, they are an indelible stain on the global fashion industry. It is time for people to take a stand and demand that products are not made by slave labor from Xinjiang's concentration camps.

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