

27 April 2018

Turkmenistan: Human rights defender Gaspar Matalaev remains in prison

Human rights defender, **Gaspar Matalaev**, remains imprisoned in Turkmenabat on false charges of fraud and bribery, having been sentenced to three years at his trial on 9 November 2016. He is suffering ill-health as a result of the conditions inside the labour camp and his family has not been allowed to visit him.

[Gaspar Matalaev](#) is a human rights defender and reporter for the Alternative Turkmenistan News (ATN). He was one of the few independent journalists working undercover to investigate and reveal forced labour, including child labour, that is administered by the state during the cotton harvests. During the 2016 cotton harvest he gathered evidence from Farap District (in the Lebap Province), in the form of interviews and photographs of people being coerced by regional authorities to work in cotton fields, in order for government quotas to be met.

During the 2016 cotton harvest the human rights defender repeatedly visited collection points (where trucks collect the labourers) and the fields. He interviewed doctors, teachers and other civil servants, who were forced to collect cotton under the threat of dismissal from their jobs. Despite Turkmenistan's ban on child labour during cotton harvesting, Gaspar also interviewed children who were working in the fields in the place of their parents or children who were hired by other families in order to financially support their own.

On 2 October 2016, ATN published a photo report from Gaspar Matalaev entitled, "They bring people to cotton fields in the back of trucks, like they are sheep for sale". Two days later, on the night of October 4, four plainclothes police officers arrested Gaspar Matalaev at his home. An arrest warrant was not presented at the time, but the human rights defender was told that his arrest was in relation to photographs and information he had posted online. The police officers took the human rights defender's phone, as well as the mobile phone of his younger brother.

At the police station, the human rights defender was taken to the basement where he was knocked to the floor, kicked repeatedly, and cursed for "disparaging the Motherland." In an attempt to force him to confess to having committed fraud, he was tortured with electroshocks. He was also interrogated by members of the Ministry of National Security.

The human rights defender's trial on the 9 November 2016 did not meet international standards; additional charges were arbitrarily added and substantive evidence against him

was absent. In Turkmenistan, those convicted of crimes deemed to be “moderate”, including fraud, are entitled to amnesty or early release. Bribery was added to the charges against him, presumably because those convicted of economic crimes including bribery, are not entitled to a pardon by the state. The court found Gaspar Matalaev guilty and sentenced him to three years in prison. He was charged with fraud under Article 228.2.3 of the Criminal Code and with bribery under Article 185.34.1.

Turkmenistan is proportionally one of the largest cotton-producing countries in the world and state-administered forced labour underpins the sector. As a result of Gaspar Matalaev’s work, several foreign companies have refused to buy Turkmen cotton and textile products and it has raised the profile of the issue among Western governments and international organizations.

Front Line Defenders strongly condemns and requests that the Turkmen government immediately releases Gaspar Matalaev and desist from acting in retaliation of the human rights defenders’ peaceful work in promoting human rights.