



safeguard
DEFENDERS

May 7, 2024

Hon. Ambassador Zappia,

We write to express our grave concern over the [China-Europe Railway Express](#), a flagship project under the People's Republic of China's Belt and Road Initiative, filled with agricultural products that is en route from Urûmchi, the capital city of the Uyghur homeland, to Salerno in Italy.

At the end of last year, democratic allies and international media applauded the Italian Government's decision to rescind its 2019 Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative with the People's Republic of China.

Allowing this first-ever China-Europe BRI train - as boasted by PRC propaganda outlets - to enter Italian territory filled with products that are the presumed product of forced labor would send a very stark and opposite message.

As groups dedicated to upholding and promoting human rights globally, we are gravely troubled by the implications of such imports for Italy's commitment to human rights and ethical trade practices.

The modern-day enslavement of the Uyghur people, and the ongoing crimes against humanity, have been widely documented by international organizations, independent media outlets, and government bodies. The use of forced labor in any form violates fundamental human rights principles, including the right to freedom from slavery and forced labor, as enshrined in various international conventions and treaties to which Italy is a party.

The United States Government and multiple democratic Parliaments have determined that a genocide is ongoing against the Uyghur people. Moreover, consistent and credible allegations of State-sponsored forced labor have been denounced by national and international bodies, including the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

These findings directly contributed to the adoption of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act by the U.S. Congress, which imposes a rebuttable presumption that any goods coming from the Uyghur Region are the product of forced labor.

This is of particular concern in the agricultural sector. As [a January 2022 report](#) by Professor Laura T. Murphy and Nyrola Elima laid out: *"Agricultural forced labor in the Uyghur Region threatens both domestic and global supply chains. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region*

(XUAR or Uyghur Region) grows 85% of China's cotton, more than 70% of its tomatoes (and produces as much as 90% of its export tomato paste), 50% of its walnuts, and 28% of the country's grapes. The region also grows wheat, corn, and other grains. [...] Significant evidence reveals that labor transfers in the Uyghur Region occur within an environment of unprecedented coercion, undergirded by the constant threat of re-education and internment. Many indigenous workers are unable to refuse or voluntarily exit jobs in the agricultural sector, and thus the programs are tantamount to forcible transfer of populations, forced labor, human trafficking, and enslavement.”

Just last month, the European Parliament passed the EU's own Forced Labor Regulation, enabling the EU to prohibit the sale, import, and export of goods made using forced labor. Member state authorities and the European Commission will be able to investigate suspicious goods, supply chains, and manufacturers.

In [a report published earlier this year](#), Dr. Adrian Zenz reiterated how the “Poverty Alleviation Through Labor Transfer program” continues to expand and how it is *“the only forced labor policy that has been directly linked to the production of cotton, tomatoes and tomato products, peppers and seasonal agricultural products, seafood products, polysilicon production for solar panels, lithium for electric vehicle batteries, and aluminum for batteries, vehicle bodies, and wheels.”*

[Following his report](#), the International Labour Organisation (ILO) issued a new handbook that adds a substantial new section on state-imposed forced labor, squarely targeting Beijing's forced labor in the Uyghur Region and Tibet and specifically referring to “labor transfers” of ethnic minorities.

Production in the Uyghur Region is overseen by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, a paramilitary unit whose senior officials have been sanctioned by both the [U.S.](#) and the [EU](#).

The alarm has also been sounded by Italian organizations. In August 2023, [Coldiretti and Filiera Italia](#) reiterated its longstanding concern over the agricultural imports (in particular tomato paste) from the Uyghur Region: *“[...] there is a +50% increase in Chinese tomato paste imports at half the price of the Italian one thanks to the exploitation of political prisoners and the Muslim Uighur minority in Xinjiang. This is what Coldiretti and Filiera Italia report based on data from the World Processing Tomato Council on the occasion of the start of the harvest [...]. A scenario in which China, with 7.3 billion kilos in 2023, overtakes Italy in the world ranking of industrial tomato producers.”*

As a member of the international community, Italy has a responsibility to ensure that its trade practices align with its commitment to human rights and ethical standards. Allowing goods produced through forced labor to enter its borders not only condones these egregious human rights abuses but also undermines the credibility of Italy's stance on human rights promotion and enforcement.

We urge the Italian government to take immediate action to investigate the origin of the goods arriving in Salerno and to implement measures to prevent the import of products produced by forced labor.

Furthermore, we call on Italy to work with its international partners to address the root causes of state-imposed forced labor under the authority of the Chinese government, and to uphold the rights and dignity of all individuals affected by these abuses.

Our organizations are always available to engage with the Italian government and other relevant stakeholders to address this urgent issue and to work towards ensuring that Italy's trade practices are in line with its human rights obligations.

We thank you for your prompt attention to our concerns and kindly request a meeting with you in Washington, D.C., so that you can hear from our organizations firsthand about the massive human cost and impact of the Chinese government's forced labor on the lives of Uyghur Americans, and Uyghurs around the globe. We await your response.

Sincerely,

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Elfidar Iltebir

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