

Britain at Risk of Becoming Hub for Forced Labour Imports, Watchdog Warns

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Britain faces the growing threat of becoming a haven for imported goods made with forced labour, a new parliamentary report warns. Lawmakers are calling for stronger legislation to prevent items linked to human rights abuses from ending up on UK shelves.

A recent 99-page report from the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR), which includes members of both Houses of Parliament, criticises the current lack of enforceable rules

surrounding the import of goods tied to forced labour. The committee highlights the ongoing flow of products from regions like Xinjiang, China, where the Chinese Communist Party has been accused of detaining and exploiting the Uyghur Muslim minority, to the UK without adequate oversight or restrictions.

While the Modern Slavery Act 2015 was intended to address such abuses, the committee argues it falls short due to its voluntary approach and lack of enforcement mechanisms. The JCHR is now pushing for mandatory human rights due diligence for UK-based firms, meaning businesses would have a legal duty to ensure their supply chains are free from forced labour. This includes implementing supplier standards and facing penalties for non-compliance.

The United States and the European Union have already introduced import bans on goods linked to forced labour, increasing pressure on the UK to adopt similar measures. Without action, the report states, Britain could become a dumping ground for unethical products that are banned in other major markets.

Evidence presented to the committee includes reports of cargo flights transporting goods directly from Xinjiang to the UK, and media investigations suggesting that supermarket products contain tomatoes harvested under forced labour conditions. In its recommendations, the committee urges the government to define clear responsibilities for preventing such imports and to outline procedures for confiscating non-compliant goods.

Further concerns have been raised regarding ongoing trade negotiations, particularly with countries like India, where modern slavery remains widespread. According to data compiled by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Walk Free Foundation in collaboration with the United Nations, millions of people are subjected to forced labour in countries with which the UK is engaged in trade negotiations.

The JCHR also suggests taking cues from European Union trade practices by incorporating human rights clauses into future trade agreements. This would allow Britain to uphold ethical standards while protecting its economic interests.

Lord David Alton, who chairs the committee, underscored the urgency of the matter. “It’s intolerable in the 21st century that we profiteer on the broken backs of slave labour, from Uighur servitude in Xinjiang to child labour in the cobalt mines of the Congo,” he said.

Despite growing international scrutiny and credible evidence, the UK's response remains inconsistent. The committee concludes that without decisive government leadership and legal reform, the country's trade practices risk undermining its global standing on human rights.