CIVIL SOCIETY STATEMENT ON THE PROPOSED SECTION 301 DETERMINATIONS ON FORCED LABOR

July 1, 2026

We are civil society organizations that have spent years — in some cases decades — working to eliminate forced labor from global supply chains. We know this issue from the ground up: from the workers who have reported their exploitation to us, from the lawsuits we've filed, from the supply chain investigations we have conducted, and from the labor reforms we have supported in the U.S. and around the world. We believe that import prohibitions can be a powerful tool to combat forced labor in global supply chains.

We support strong action against forced labor. We agree that governments should take measures to exclude goods made with forced labor from entering their markets. We recognize that a growing number of countries have adopted or moved toward import ban mechanisms in recent months, many under pressure from the U.S. government.

The U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) announced last month that it would impose tariffs of up to 12.5 percent on 60 economies under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 for failing to enact or effectively enforce a prohibition on the importation of goods made with forced labor.

But to build effective forced labor import ban mechanisms, countries need time. Time to legislate. Time to implement. And time to create the customs infrastructure needed to enforce. Countries also need clear direction. USTR should establish a credible, structured pathway — one tied to realistic progress on import bans — that offers a clear route to zero tariffs.

The import ban standards published by USTR on June 2, 2026 in the "Report in Section 301 Investigations of the Acts, Policies, and Practices of Various Economies Related to the Failure to Impose and Effectively Enforce a Prohibition on the Importation of Goods Produced with Forced Labor" set a high bar. These principles reflect years of work by workers, unions, civil society organizations, and academic researchers. We are encouraged by the focus on the key principles of an effective import ban mechanism, but countries must now have time to incorporate those key principles into law.

The USTR Section 301 investigations opened in March 2026, and the proposed tariffs were announced in June. Three months is not enough time for countries to establish credible forced labor import prohibition regimes. Effective systems require legislation, customs capacity, regulatory infrastructure, and meaningful consultation with workers and civil society. These reforms cannot be built overnight. Efforts to implement the U.S. forced labor import prohibition took decades, and multiple legislative amendments, before they began to bear real fruit.

Phased implementation of tariffs is permitted under Section 301. Many of us, including the Human Trafficking Legal Center, Corporate Accountability Lab (CAL), Transparentem and others, urged USTR during the April public hearings to prioritize technical assistance, capacity building, and constructive engagement, particularly with less-resourced nations, before turning to coercive trade measures. A phased approach would give governments a genuine opportunity to implement durable reforms. Moving too fast runs the risk that countries will adopt laws without the necessary consultations or enforcement mechanisms to make those laws effective. Investigations under such laws would be perfunctory, if not performative. Such efforts would fail to dismantle supply chains tainted by forced labor.

The United States must also confront its own challenges. Forced labor exists on U.S. farms, as well as in factories, prisons, and for-profit detention facilities. Forced labor remains a documented problem in many sectors of the U.S. economy. Prosecutions in the United States remain abysmally low, with just 10 federal forced labor prosecutions in the U.S. in 2024.

Further, the U.S. government's enforcement of its own existing import restrictions has been waning. According to Walk Free, the U.S. imports $169 billion worth of goods at risk of forced labor each year. In May 2026, U.S. Customs and Border Protection stopped just 247 shipments valued at $44 million for potential forced labor violations. To enhance the credibility of U.S. efforts, and to encourage higher standards by our trading partners, the U.S. should ramp up enforcement of its existing forced labor import bans under the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA), Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), and Section 307 of the Tariff Act of 1930.

Efforts to eliminate forced labor should strengthen civil society capacity, government action, and corporate accountability. The United States has institutions capable of supporting lasting reform, including the Department of Labor's Bureau of International Labor Affairs (DOL-ILAB), the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, and the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL). The ILO — for which U.S. support is woefully lacking, having allowed unpaid dues to affect U.S. representation — is the legitimate multilateral forum for this work. Investing in these institutions is essential; they are the engines driving durable change.

These measures come at a time of significant disruption in global trade. Broad tariffs can have unintended, negative consequences for workers. Factory closures, reduced orders, and job losses harm workers. Targeted technical assistance, foreign assistance, and sustained support for reform are more likely to improve labor conditions than tariffs.

Governments that are now developing forced labor import prohibition frameworks must engage with workers, trade unions, and civil society experts. The strongest systems are those built in partnership with the people they are intended to protect.

USTR has an opportunity to achieve universal adoption of import bans, a powerful tool to combat forced labor. But adoption alone is not enough. The credibility of these bans depends on the rigor with which they are designed and enforced. To provide the time and investment necessary to build import bans consistent with the key principles outlined by the USTR, U.S. trade partners need engagement, and a phased approach to Section 301. Only then can we disrupt forced labor.

Signed,

The Human Trafficking Legal Center

Transparentem

International Corporate Accountability Roundtable (ICAR)

Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project (Canada)

Humanity United Action

Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

FishWise

Advocates for Public Interest Law (Korea)

Fundación Libera contra la Trata de Personas y la Esclavitud en Todas sus Formas (Chile)

Corporate Accountability Lab

Greenpeace USA

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