

**Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences; the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent; the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises; the Special Rapporteur on minority issues and the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance**

Ref.: AL USA 44/2025  
(Please use this reference in your reply)

20 January 2026

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences; Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent; Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises; Special Rapporteur on minority issues and Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 51/15, 45/24, 60/8, 53/3, 52/5 and 52/36.

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information we have received concerning the allegedly pervasive practice of forced labor and involuntary servitude in prisons in the southern United States, including in the states of Alabama and Louisiana. Specifically, it has been reported to us that incarcerated individuals are compelled to work for no pay or for extremely low wages under coercive and punitive working conditions. These practices have allegedly been linked to the disproportionate criminalization of people of African descent, most of them reportedly have a precarious socio-economic background. These practices are particularly prevalent in the southern states, and their contemporary manifestation is allegedly linked to the brutal legacy of chattel slavery.

According to information received:

Incarcerated workers in Alabama are compelled to work under threat of a range of sanctions, including assignment to additional unpaid labour, placement in solitary confinement, transfer to higher-security facilities, and formal disciplinary reports that negatively affect their eligibility for parole.

In Alabama, Louisiana, and other states, incarcerated persons are forced to work for both private and public employers—including the prison system itself—under the threat of physical violence and disciplinary sanctions. State prisons depend on the unpaid labor of incarcerated workers to run the prisons themselves: incarcerated workers cook and serve meals, clean, perform repairs and maintenance, deliver information and goods throughout the prison, care for elderly and infirm individuals, and even help guard prison units. Meanwhile, some prison work assignments have more to do with domination and control than with profit: incarcerated workers are made to perform degrading, onerous, and useless tasks by prison overseers. Private companies extract profits from incarcerated workers leased out to them by state prison systems; these “work

release” workers, unlike free employees, cannot quit their jobs without risking punishment, even when they are experiencing dangerous conditions or abusive treatment on the job. Like the prison system itself, forced prison labor in the United States disproportionately harms people of African descent.

Workers deprived of liberty also face consequences for being sick, needing rest, or challenging dangerous and exploitative workplaces in Alabama prisons. [As has been publicly reported by Alabama Appleseed Center for Law and Justice](#), prisons in Alabama have five times the national average death rate. In 2023 alone, 325 prisoners allegedly died in the Alabama Department of Corrections custody.

For example, an incarcerated individual in Alabama was assigned to a work-release program after prison authorities determined that he did not pose a public safety risk and could work for a private employer outside direct correctional supervision. According to the information provided, he was required to work in unsafe conditions for a private company and, when he declined to continue due to safety concerns in February 2022, he received a disciplinary charge for “refusing to work” and was punished with 30 days of unpaid labour and was denied access to his phone and to family visits. Several months later, this individual reportedly refused a transfer to another correctional facility where multiple deaths had occurred in custody and where he would have been required to perform uncompensated labour. He was subsequently issued another disciplinary infraction, this time for “inciting a riot”.

Another example concerns a different incarcerated worker assigned to a private employer in Alabama. After he raised concerns regarding unpaid bonuses, he was reportedly dismissed by the employer. Prison authorities then punished him with 30 days of extra work duty and loss of visitation, telephone and commissary access solely for “being fired from a job.” Information received further indicates that the State continues to impose such disciplinary measures on incarcerated persons who decline to work.

Information received indicates that involuntary servitude also persists at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, commonly known as Angola, an 18,000-acre former prison plantation where incarcerated persons are reportedly compelled to work in unsafe, humiliating, and degrading conditions. Information received indicates that at Angola, approximately 72 percent of those subjected to field labour are men of African descent, and more than half are over the age of 50. According to the information provided, incarcerated individuals are assigned to groups known as “Farm Lines,” and forced to work in the fields of the prison under the supervision of armed guards. They are required to dig ditches and harvest crops in extreme heat and humidity, often without adequate safety equipment or modern machinery. Incarcerated men are not paid for their labor on the Farm Line for the first three years of incarceration, and when they are eligible for pay, they earn a mere \$0.02 per hour. Persons who refuse or whose performance is considered inadequate or inefficient reportedly face punishment—including but not limited to extended placement in solitary confinement, and a series of work violations that impact parole eligibility. Whether an incarcerated person refuses to work on the Farm Line or not, these

conditions place individuals at serious risk of physical and psychological harm, including life-threatening heat-related illnesses. Even persons with disabilities are reportedly required to perform this type of forced agricultural work. Such practices have generated significant trauma, as individuals describe experiences that mirror chattel slavery and racial violence.

Reports indicate that individuals deprived of liberty lack regular access to clean drinking water and are sometimes left with water containing mold or dead insects, and that shade, breaks, and sanitary bathrooms are routinely unavailable, even during extreme heat conditions, with temperatures exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

Assignment to the Farm Line is also reportedly used as a method of punishment for alleged disciplinary infractions, including through degrading “make-work” tasks such as hand-watering long rows of crops with buckets and cups or pulling blades of grass by hand. This unpaid labour—performed under threat of punishment—is described as degrading, dehumanizing, and a mechanism used to control and subjugate incarcerated persons, most of whom are of African descent.

Information received also indicates that the state of Louisiana also generates economic profit from its exploitative labour practices. Prison Enterprises, the division overseeing certain agricultural and industrial prison work programs, reportedly manages the labour of some incarcerated persons at Angola. Unlike the Farm Line, Prison Enterprises generates significant profits from exploiting extremely low-paid incarcerated workers. As of 2019, nearly 30 percent of its incarcerated workforce laboured in the fields in Angola, either without pay or for \$0.02 per hour. Prison Enterprises reportedly sell the goods and labour of incarcerated persons to the state, parish, and local governments as well as to nonprofit organizations. In 2021 and 2022, incarcerated workers planted, grew, and harvested nearly 3,000 acres of crops, most of which were reportedly sold on the open market. According to the information received, these unsafe, unpaid, and compulsory labour practices amount to contemporary forms of slavery operating within Louisiana’s prisons.

While we do not wish to prejudge the accuracy of these allegations, we express our serious concern about the exploitative labour practices in correctional facilities in Alabama and Louisiana and about the fact that these disproportionately affect people of African descent. Not all prison labour is per se unlawful under international human rights and labour standards. However, under article 2(1) of the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), forced labour is defined as “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily.” The Convention further provides that compulsory prison labour is permissible only under the narrow exception of article 2(2)(c) when it is imposed as a consequence of a conviction by a court, performed under the supervision and control of a public authority, and not placed at the disposal of private entities.

Furthermore, we highlight the obligations emanating the article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by your

Excellency's Government on 8 June 1992, no person shall be subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

We also highlight the obligation under the article 1 (e) of the ILO Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105), ratified by your Excellency's Government on 25 September 1991, which obliges States to suppress forced labour used "as a means of racial, social, national or religious discrimination."

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the **Annex on Reference to international human rights law** attached to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and/or comment(s) you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please provide detailed information on the legal and policy framework governing prison labour in Alabama and Louisiana, including any regulations concerning work assignments, disciplinary measures for refusing to work, and the provision of wages, safety equipment, rest breaks and medical care. Please also indicate how these frameworks comply with the United States' obligations under international human rights and labour law, including the Slavery Convention of 1926, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and relevant ILO Conventions.
3. Please provide information on any oversight, monitoring, or inspection mechanisms—whether judicial, administrative, or independent—tasked with reviewing prison labour programs and ensuring that such labour is not performed under coercive, unsafe, discriminatory or degrading conditions. If such mechanisms exist, please provide information on investigations, findings, any administrative/disciplinary or other measures applied in case misconduct was identified and any remedial measures taken in the past five years.
4. Please provide information on measures taken to ensure that prison labour does not discriminate against incarcerated individuals on the basis of race, gender, age, disability, or socio-economic status.
5. Please provide data on the currently incarcerated population in correctional facilities located in Alabama and Louisiana, disaggregated by race, gender and age. Please also indicate how many incarcerated individuals are currently working and in which sector (e.g. agriculture).
6. Please state how equality and non-discrimination guarantees are incorporated into prison labour policies and practices.

This communication and any response received from your Excellency's Government will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) within 60 days. They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations.

We may publicly express our concerns in the near future as, in our view, the information upon which the press release will be based is sufficiently reliable to indicate a matter warranting immediate attention. We also believe that the wider public should be alerted to the potential implications of the above-mentioned allegations. The press release will indicate that we have been in contact with your Excellency's Government's to clarify the issue/s in question.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Tomoya Obokata  
Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences

Isabelle Mamadou  
Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent

Matthew Gillett  
Vice-Chair on communications of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention

Damilola S. Olawuyi  
Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises

Nicolas Levrat  
Special Rapporteur on minority issues

Ashwini K.P.  
Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance

## Annex

### Reference to international human rights law

In connection with above alleged facts and concerns, we wish to draw your Excellency's Government's attention to the relevant international norms and standards that are applicable to the issues raised by the situation described above.

We firstly wish to draw the attention of your Excellency's Government to the fact that international human rights law prohibits the imposition of labour under coercive, degrading, or hazardous conditions. Under article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by your Excellency's Government on 8 June 1992, no person shall be subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. The Nelson Mandela Rules (rules 1, 43 and 97) similarly prohibit any work that is "of an afflictive nature," or carried out under conditions incompatible with human dignity.

We further recall that ILO Convention No. 29, article 2(2)(c), ratified by your Excellency's Government on 8 June 1992, explicitly prohibits the hiring-out of prison labour to private companies where prisoners have not offered themselves voluntarily, even where the labour is imposed following a conviction.

We also recall that ILO Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105), article 1(e), ratified by your Excellency's Government on 25 September 1991, obliges States to suppress forced labour used "as a means of racial, social, national or religious discrimination." In addition, ICCPR article 8(1) prohibits slavery in all its forms, and article 26 guarantees equal protection of the law without discrimination.

We wish to make reference to the report of Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, to the fifty seventh session of the Human Rights Council ([A/HRC/57/46](#)), in paragraph 1 of which he states that "[I]ncarcerated individuals should be recognized as workers who can enjoy conditions with regard to wages, social security and occupational safety and health that are comparable to the conditions of workers outside correctional settings." According to paragraph 5 of his report, while incarcerated persons should be permitted to work under free and fair conditions, "labour during incarceration should not have a punitive purpose or effect." Paragraph 21 of the report notes that "threats to impose, or the imposition of, penalties or disciplinary actions, including solitary confinement, loss of family visitation, access to telephone calls and recreational activities, the extension of incarceration periods and rejection of parole" constitute clear instances of involuntary prison labour.

We would like to highlight the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which were unanimously endorsed in 2011 by the Human Rights Council in its resolution (A/HRC/RES/17/31) after years of consultation with governments, civil society, human rights defenders and the business community. The guiding principles have been established as the authoritative global standard for all businesses to prevent and address business-related adverse human rights impacts. These guiding principles are based on the recognition of:

- a) The role of business enterprises as specialized bodies or corporations performing specialized functions, which must comply with all applicable laws and respect human rights.
- b) The need for rights and obligations to be matched by appropriate and effective remedies when they are violated".

The guiding principles also make clear that business enterprises have an independent responsibility to respect human rights. Principles 11-24 and 29-31 provide guidance to business enterprises on how to meet their responsibility to respect human rights and to provide remedies where they have caused or contributed to adverse impacts.

The Guiding Principles have identified two main components of the corporate responsibility to respect human rights, which require “business enterprises to:

- a) Prevent their own activities from causing or contributing to adverse human rights impacts and address those impacts when they occur.
- b) Seek to prevent or mitigate adverse human rights impacts directly related to operations, products or services provided through their business relationships, even where they have not contributed to those impacts”. (guiding principle 13).

The commentary to guiding principle 13 notes that companies can be affected by adverse human rights impacts, either through their own activities or as a result of their business relationships with other parties (...) The 'activities' of business enterprises are understood to include both actions and omissions; and their 'business relationships' include relationships with business partners, entities in their value chain and any other non-State or State entities directly linked to their business operations, products or services.

To meet their responsibility to respect human rights, companies should have in place policies and procedures appropriate to their size and circumstances:

- a) A political commitment to uphold their responsibility to respect human rights.
- b) A human rights due diligence process to identify, prevent, mitigate and account for how they address their human rights impact.
- c) Processes to redress any adverse human rights impacts they have caused or contributed to (guiding principle 15).

According to guiding principles 16-21, human rights due diligence involves:

- a) Identifying and assessing actual or potential adverse human rights impacts that the enterprise has caused or contributed to through its activities, or

that are directly related to the operations, products or services provided by its business relationships.

- b) Integrate the results of impact assessments into relevant business functions and processes and take appropriate action in accordance with their involvement in the impact.
- c) Monitor the effectiveness of the measures and processes adopted to address these adverse human rights impacts in order to know whether they are working.
- d) Communicate how adverse effects are addressed and demonstrate to stakeholders - particularly those affected - that appropriate policies and processes are in place to implement respect for human rights in practice.

Where an enterprise causes or is likely to cause an adverse human rights impact, it should take the necessary steps to end or prevent that impact. “The establishment of operational-level grievance mechanisms for those potentially affected by corporate activities can be an effective means of redress provided they meet certain requirements listed in principle 31 (guiding principle 22). Furthermore, business enterprises should remedy any actual adverse impact that they cause or to which they contribute. Remedies can take a variety of forms and may include apologies, restitution, rehabilitation, financial or non-financial compensation and punitive sanctions (whether criminal or administrative, such as fines), as well as the prevention of harm through, for example, injunctions or guarantees of non-repetition. Procedures for the provision of remedy should be impartial, protected from corruption and free from political and other attempts to influence the outcome (commentary to guiding principle 25).

We would also like to highlight the Working Group's report ([A/HRC/32/45](#)) on State Owned Enterprises, and the duty of States to protect against human rights abuses involving those business enterprises that they own or control.