

# ITMF 2024 Conference: Uzbekistan Showcases Modern Textile Investment

*Rachael Davis*



Approximately 400 delegates from 40 countries gathered in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, for three days of discussions and presentations covering a broad array of textile topics.

**Themed “Innovation, Cooperation, and Regulation — Driving Forces of the Textile and Apparel Industry” the ITMF’s recent annual conference was hosted in partnership with the International Apparel Federation (IAF) in Samarkand, Uzbekistan.**

*By James M. Borneman, Editor In Chief*

The Zurich-based International Textile Manufacturers Federation (ITMF) recently held its annual conference in conjunction with The International Apparel Federation (IAF) World Fashion Convention in Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

The three-day event included discussions and presentations covering a broad array of topics affecting the future of the global textile supply chain.

“The conference convened with 400 delegates for three days with 40 presentations by as many industry experts,” noted Dr. Christian Schindler, ITMF director general. “Participants came to Samarkand from 40 countries from around the globe. The general theme of the conference, ‘Innovation, Cooperation & Regulation — Drivers of the Textile & Apparel Industry,’ served as a framework for presentations covering a broad tapestry of important issues facing global textile manufacturing.”

## **Strong Presentations**

The opening day of sessions took a deep dive into global issues facing cotton and man-made fibers.

The Cotton Fiber session, moderated by Muhammad Anees Khawaja, of Pakistan-based Mahmood Group featured presentations by Uday Gill, Indorama Corp.; Nezihi Aslankeser, Cotton Council International; Rama Janarthanan, Arise; Terry Townsend, Cotton Analytics; and Corin Wood-Jones, Better Cotton.

The Man-Made session, moderated by Stefan Hutter, of Singapore-based Saentis Textiles featured presentations by Alexei Sinitza, Wood Mackenzie; Nezihi Aslankeser, Cotton Council

International; Jay Sardana, Reliance; and Florian Heubrandner, Lenzing. An interesting take-away was the realization of how far Uzbekistan has come with cotton cultivation and textile manufacturing, as well as the need to develop the man-made fiber component of Uzbek textile production to continue a growth trajectory in the industry.

The first day of the conference concluded with a session titled “Audit Fatigue — Progress Made & Way Forward” that addressed the challenges associated with international compliance. Anne Sutanto of Indonesia-based Pan Brothers moderated the panel featuring Janet Mensink, SLCP; Michael Cai, Décor; and Nate Herman, American Apparel and Footwear Association (AAFA).

## Setting The Stage

Day two of “Innovation, Cooperation, and Regulation” opened with a keynote address by Uzbekistan Deputy Prime Minister Jamshid Khodjaev.

Khodjaev’s focus was the positive effect of moving past the cotton boycott that Uzbekistan had faced in recent years and embracing Better Work and Better Cotton Initiatives.



(left to right): Republic of Uzbekistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry Chairman Davron Vakhobov, Governor of Samarkand Region Erkinjo Turdimov, International Apparel Federation (IAF) President Cem Altan, Uzbekistan Deputy Prime Minister Jamshid Khodjaev, International Textile Manufacturers Federation (ITMF) President K. V. Srinivasan and Uzbek Textile & Apparel Industry Association (UZTS) Acting President Mirmukhsin Sultanov.

## Moving Beyond The Boycott

As a matter of context, the meeting occurred in the Uzbekistan post-cotton-ban-era. This global boycott of Uzbek cotton, a time also known as the Cotton Pledge, was initiated in 2010 by the Cotton Campaign. At the heart of the matter was child labor, a State-Run system of forced labor as well as human rights violations. During the ban, more than 330 companies, including brands like Gap and C&A, pledged not to use Uzbek cotton. Cotton was a significant export for Uzbekistan, and the boycott significantly negatively impacted exports. The boycott lasted 11 years, from 2010 to 2022.

According to sources, following President Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s rise to power in 2016, Uzbekistan implemented significant reforms to address forced labor.

With campaigns by The World Bank and International Labor Organization, by 2021 it was determined by independent monitors that systemic forced labor had been effectively eliminated from the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan. In March 2022, the Cotton Campaign officially ended the boycott, allowing companies to reengage with the Uzbek cotton sector. Some of the major effects of the reforms were privatization and a transformation in cotton textiles from simply producing raw cotton for export to the domestic creation of higher value textile products.

By 2022, 100 percent of the cotton grown in Uzbekistan was further processed domestically — and the country no longer exported raw cotton. Textile product exports, on the other hand, rose from hundreds of millions of dollars during the ban to \$3.2 billion dollars in 2022.

Wages grew within the industry, foreign investors showed interest, and the shift into manufacturing/processing cotton created new jobs.

Uzbekistan's focus turned to the 130 newly established private cotton clusters embracing quality control, innovation and establishing inroads throughout the textile value chain.

Embracing the latest technologies as well as practices regarding sustainability and traceability are key elements in rebuilding Uzbekistan's reputation from its tarnished past. These ideas were center stage in Deputy Prime Minister Khodjaev's presentation.

## **An International Welcome**

Uzbek Textile & Apparel Industry Association (UZTS) Chairman Mirmukhsin Sultanov, ITMF president K. V. Srinivasan and IAF President Cem Altan welcomed delegates and dignitaries from around the globe to the 2024 event.

Major sessions included presentations regarding:

- Textile & Apparel Industry in Uzbekistan;
- Sustainability & Regulation;
- Digitalization;
- Artificial Intelligence in the Textile Value Chain; and
- Collaboration

The first session titled, "Textile & Apparel Industry in Uzbekistan" was moderated by Aziz Akhrarov of Uzbekistan-based Samarkand Apparel and featured presentations by Kihak Sung, Youngone; Abu Yousuf, Better Work; Karim Shafei, Gherzi; Muzaffar Razakov, Global Textile; and Mirmukhsin Sultanov, UZTS. This session was a showcase of the host country's textile transformation and vision for a textile focused future.

The "Sustainability & Regulation" session, moderated by Mustafa Denizer of Turkey-based Diktas, featured presentations by Dirk Vantghem, EURATEX; Kenichi Tomiyoshi, JTF; Yan Yan, CNTAC; and Steve Lamar, American Apparel and Footwear Association (AAFA). The session drove home the point that there is a burgeoning regulatory environment brewing in Europe; Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance (ESG) compliance continues as a hot button issue globally; and regarding the United States, exporters need to keep an eye on state as well as federal regulations. The THREADS Fashion Protocol also was discussed in the context of creating harmonized regulations.

The "Digitalization" session, moderated by Stefano Festa Marzotto of Italy-based Miles Manifattura, featured presentations by Nate Herman, AAFA; and Christian Lott, DMIX. Herman highlighted the need for the adoption of digital garment labeling, while Lott presented the DMIX Samplr — an intriguing technology that "creates precise digital replicas of flat physical materials." Lott also hammered home the need to pay attention to the coming regulations of the Digital Product Passport (DPP), offering a stern warning that those who are not in compliance could find themselves "out-of-business" in Europe.

The "Artificial Intelligence in the Textile Value Chain" session, moderated by Rafael Cervone of Brazil-based ABIT, featured presentations by Thomas Gries, ITA Group; and Povilas Sugintas, Euromonitor.

The final day of the conference opened with a session titled "Collaboration." Fazlee Shamim Ehsan of Bangladesh-based Fatullah Apparel moderated a panel featuring Felix Poza Peña, Inditex; Akila Fernando, Epic Group; and Femi Akinrebiyo, International Finance Corporation (IFC) —the financial arm of the World Bank.

The speakers highlighted how companies were working together to affect a range of issues from micro-plastic pollution to climate change and the complexity of the supply chain. IFC's Akinrebiyo explained that the IFC was less of a bank and more of a development partner focused on waste reduction opportunities in the textile value chain.

## Showcasing Innovation

The ITMF Startup Awards honored companies breaking new ground in textiles.

Tae Jin Kang of Seoul National University, Korea, moderated the first panel which featured the following innovations:

- Bylon — scalable, melt-spun fibers without oil or waste developed by Sci-Lume Labs, Oklahoma City, Okla.;
- SYCORE-TEX — materials of topological softgel for ultra-thermal insulation from China-based Sycoretex CAS;
- RE&UP — scalable recycling technologies for high-performance fibers developed by RE&UP Recycling Technologies, the Netherlands; and
- Syre — hyperscale textile-to-textile recycling from Syre Impact, Sweden.

Juan Pares of Spain-based Textil Santanderina presented the winners of the ITMF Innovation & Sustainability Award 2024, which were:

- High-Technique Fiber Co., China, for low-carbon & sustainable innovation in PET fiber industry;
- HeiQ AeonIQ, Switzerland, for Hyperscaling HeiQ AeonIQ; and
- Samsara Eco, Australia, for Infinite plastic recycling — a solution for end-of-life textiles.

## International Cooperation

Winners of the ITMF International Cooperation Award 2024 included:

- Next generation cellulosic filaments from hemp — DITF, Germany & RBX Creations, France; and
- Open lab — HKRITA, Hong Kong, China.

## Scratching The Surface

Although every presentation deserved to be highlighted, the quality of the work was difficult to present in such an abridged fashion. However, the presentations were catalysts for further discussions, networking, and in-depth analysis.

“The presentations provided the participants with relevant insights thus assisting them to better assess the current and especially the future business environment,” said Dr. Schindler. “It was important to see how regulation will shape the evolution of the textile value chain around the world. Likewise, to see all the innovation presented in the session about the various ITMF Awards Winners 2024 was impressive — recycling, circularity, sustainability are important forces driving innovation and collaboration.”



Jamshid Ismatullaev, owner and CEO of Chust Textile, Uzbekistan, presented his company's accomplishments during the conference. Chust opened in 2007 as a small work-shop employing 50 people. Pictured is its GULZOR dyeing facility

established in 2019.

## **Understanding Uzbekistan**

Muzaffar Razakov, CEO of Uzbekistan-based Global Textile presented “From tradition to innovation — how Uzbekistan is expanding its textile horizons” in the first session — a fitting topic for Global Textile. According to the company, Global Textile has been at the forefront of Uzbekistan’s textile transformation and development of the cotton “cluster” model.

This model integrates the production value chain from cotton field through finished products.

Global Textile is a fully integrated textile company managing the entire production cycle from cotton cultivation to garment manufacturing. Global cultivates 12,960 hectares of cotton fields, primarily in Uzbekistan’s Fergana region, producing 160,000 metric tons of cotton annually.

It spins 47,000 metric tons of yarn, processes 21,000 metric tons of fabric in its knitting facilities, and dyes 10,000 metric tons of fabric each year.

Global also has garment manufacturing capacity that produces 3 million items annually. According to Razakov: “Uzbekistan’s textile industry has seen remarkable growth, driven by reforms aimed at creating a competitive, investor-friendly environment. Global Textile has capitalized on these reforms, adopting value-added production processes that meet international standards and facilitating expansion into new global markets.

“The government’s support through tax incentives, financing programs, and modernization subsidies has allowed companies like Global Textile to embrace cutting-edge technologies, particularly in sustainability, he added. “Our company has benefited from export support and modernization assistance, making us more competitive on the global market.”

Regarding Uzbekistan’s selection as the host for the ITMF IAF Joint Conference Razakov commented, “This is a significant milestone for Uzbekistan, demonstrating that the global textile community once again trusts our industry.

“The conference provides a platform for Uzbekistan to showcase its achievements and potential to an international audience, further strengthening its role in the global textile landscape.”

## **Forward To Yogyakarta, Indonesia**

“The ITMF & IAF Conference 2024 in Samarkand showcased in an impressive manner how much the Uzbekistan’s cotton, textile and apparel industry was transformed since the start of the reform policy initiated in 2017 by President Mirziyoyev,” Dr. Schindler noted. “A state-monopoly that focused on exporting most of the cotton was transformed to a market-driven private economy that is adding value by producing yarns, fabrics, garments, and home textiles.”

As the event closed, Dr. Schindler acknowledged the extraordinary hospitality that was extended to the conference participants by the host associations, the Uzbek Textile and Apparel Industry Association and the Chamber of Commerce and industry in Uzbekistan.

“In completing a successful ITMF & IAF Conference 2024, the ITMF and IAF have decided to jointly hold their events also in 2025 which will be hosted by the Indonesian Textile and Apparel Industry Association (API) in the city of Yogyakarta from October 23-25, 2025,” Dr. Schindler shared at the end of the conference.

“We are very much looking for-ward to gathering in Indonesia in October 2025 back-to-back with ITMA+CITME Asia 2025 in Singapore October 28 through 31, 2025.”