

Children Forced to Pick Cotton in South Kazakhstan

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Parents say schools are sending youngsters into the fields despite official ban on child labour.

Parents in southern Kazakhstan have complained to the authorities that children are being forced to pick cotton during school hours, in defiance of a ban on child labour.

The use of child labour has been widely documented in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, but less so in Kazakhstan, where the state plays little role in driving the cotton industry, which is concentrated in the south of the country.

In recent years, plantation owners there have tended to hire adult migrant labour from neighbouring Uzbekistan. However, it appears the appeal of taking on minors for a third of the wages paid to adults means the illegal practice continues. To make things worse, there are allegations that local government officials and schools are complicit in forcing children to go out into the fields.

The full extent to which child labour was being used came to light during an investigation by the prosecutor's office in the Makhtaaraal district of South Kazakhstan region last month. Prosecutors acted after a group of parents wrote to them and the local education department asking them to look into cases of children being forced into cotton picking.

One of the letters was written by Shynaray Sauranova, from the village of Dostyk, who said her teenage son was assaulted by the deputy head of his school after refusing to go and pick cotton.

Tamara Utelbaeva, spokeswoman for the South Kazakhstan prosecutor's office, said investigators had identified systematic use of child labour.

"Inspections carried out by prosecutors in 35 out of the 185 schools [in Makhtaaraal district] showed that just 25 per cent of pupils there were going to classes," she said. "The rest had been diverted to gather cotton for private entrepreneurs."

"What's worst of all is that private farmers are using cheap child labour, and also the fact that safety regulations are not being observed," she added.

The exploitation of children was further highlighted by two accidents during the cotton harvest. In early October, a teenager walking home after a day picking cotton was hit by a car and killed. At around the same time, a tractor trailer carrying dozens of children overturned near the village of Kyzylkum, injuring four, police said.

Utelbaeva said the trailer accident involved schoolchildren who had clearly been organised into a work team as they were accompanied by their class teacher at the time. The teacher has now been dismissed, while prosecutions had been launched against the drivers involved in both road accidents.

She condemned the role played by teachers, describing it as “an abuse of children’s rights” by people “on whom they are dependent, who will run their exams and give them marks”.

The Makhtaaral district education department said on November 11 that following the investigation, six school heads had been reprimanded and 21 had received warnings.

A 35-year-old teacher who wished to remain anonymous confirmed to IWPR that children had been coerced into picking cotton. She said teachers were required to carry out the order, which came from school directors.

“We are simply told what time to collect the children at, and where to take them,” she said.

She said teachers themselves had no say in the matter and did not dare protest, for fear of losing their jobs.

Despite the prosecution service’s findings and the reprimands issued to senior school staff, the head of the education department for South Kazakstan region, Saule Ishimkulova, denied that there was any systematic breach of the rules on school attendance and child labour. Instead, she said, the education department rigorously enforced the legal ban on child labour and “there is no organised dispatch of children to pick cotton”.

After personally visiting several schools in Makhtaaral district, she said, “Teaching is going on as normal.... Of course, attendance isn’t 100 per cent- some are off sick, others have leave of absence or are off for some other reason,” she said.

She acknowledged that some pupils were helping their own families on the land outside school hours, saying, “The crop is now ready and there’s no one to gather it. Who should pick it, if not their [farmers’] own children?”

The United Nations children’s fund UNICEF says two per cent of children in Kazakstan work, a relatively low level by world standards.

The standards applied by the International Labour Organisation differentiate between various kinds of work performed by children, saying light work should be allowed only after the age of 12 or 13, heavier tasks for those aged from 14 to 16, while work described as “hazardous” should be outlawed for anyone under 18.

Coercion by state officials is accepted practice in Uzbekistan, but revelations that it has been going on in Kazakstan, albeit only at a local level, have come as a surprise. Unlike Uzbekistan, however, prosecutors here have taken action and spoken out against those who encourage such abuses.

The KTK television station, which broke the story nationally on October 21, interviewed the district governor, Kasymbek Hametov, who said that he had arranged a meeting with school heads and farmers which gave the green light to using child labour.

“We came to the common view that October would be the all-out month for gathering cotton. Young and old, we would all have to become cotton pickers,” he said.

Utelbaeva said prosecutors had protested formally to the governor and his education department after one school issued official instructions that its pupils should gather cotton.

Kairbek Jolanov, who farms cotton on a small scale, told IWPR that while it was customary to expect children to help their parents harvest their own land, what was going on involved large commercial units using school pupils rather than seasonal labour. He said they were paying only a third of the going rate for adults, which is around five US cents per kilogram picked.

Jolanov suspects that close connections between the larger farm owners and individuals in local government allows them to pressure schools into helping.

“All the large farms here belong to the big fish or to their relatives,” he said. “Take any head of a large farm – he will always have a family member, a brother or an in-law who’s a high-ranking official in the district or regional administration.”

Adolescents involved in the harvest said they had threatened with getting bad exam marks if they refused to go.

“The teachers told us that anyone who didn’t want to work would have problems in the exams,” said a ninth-grade pupil from Makhtaaral district, who added that if he was forced to work, he would rather do so for his own family.

“Why should I work for someone else when I know they’re going to pay me next to nothing?” he asked.

Reports in the Kazakstan media suggest that there are fewer seasonal workers than usual from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan this year.

Meanwhile, cotton growers have a shorter window of dry weather before the rainy season begins, as heavy rainfall in the spring meant that sowing was completed later than usual, delaying the start of the autumn harvest.

Olesia Lysenko is an IWPR-trained journalist in Kazakstan.

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