

The Cost of Uzbek White Gold

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Child labor during the cotton harvest across Uzbekistan. Photographs by Thomas Grabka with a report by IWPR.

INTRODUCTION

Gathering cotton in the autumn has been considered the most important part of life for an Uzbek citizen since Soviet times. But the hefty dollar revenues reaped by the government from its monopoly export and processing business are made on the backs of children who provide cheap labour. Many miss up to three months of school and make just a few cents for weeks of hard toil. Their living conditions are squalid, they are often hungry and as a result many fall ill. Some children have even died. In a wide-ranging investigation, IWPR journalists travelled to cotton fields across Uzbekistan, speaking to children as young as seven as they picked the crop known as white gold. We also met the officials who sent them there and defend the use of child labour to gather the country's most important harvest.

LIVING CONDITIONS

Housing for the young labourers is often primitive. Many stay in farm storehouses, without glass in the windows or doors to keep out the cold. Some are housed in school classrooms, crammed into a single, unheated room with up to 35 others. Dirty drinking water is a serious problem. Uzbek human rights organisations say many are forced to drink untreated water from wells. But water brought in for the children is little better as it is often unpurified and kept in filthy containers contaminated with mud and worms. Many have no access to bathing facilities for the length of their stay in the cotton fields. Their staple diet is macaroni, bread and sweet tea with little meat available. How much food they get depends on what they earn, usually about 20-25 sums (2 US cents) per kilogramme gathered. Local headmasters are on hand to make sure the children pick the required daily amount, which changes according to the state of the harvest.

HEALTH PROBLEMS

Not surprisingly, many children end the cotton campaign in poor health and unable to make up the weeks they've missed at school. Some suffer from colds, and there were reports this season of two children falling sick with appendicitis. Tragically, some never return. A Samarkand human rights organisation has confirmed the deaths of eight children and university students while picking cotton over the past two years. Those in charge of the harvest, desperate to hit Tashkent production targets, are reluctant to send the children to hospital because they need their labour to hit the state-imposed quotas. A lack of the most basic medical equipment only adds to the health risk for the youngsters. To gain their child an exemption from picking, wealthy families will often bribe local health authorities for a certificate of poor health. This option, of course, is far out of the reach of ordinary Uzbeks.

OFFICIAL REACTION

Uzbekistan has so far refused to sign the international convention prohibiting child labour. In response, 18 of the country's human rights groups have appealed to the international community calling for a ban on children harvesting cotton. Authorities claim it is an economic necessity to employ children during the harvest. They pay about 36,000 sums for one tonne of cotton gathered by hand and more than 41,000 sums if it is picked by a combine harvester. Local and regional politicians, meanwhile, deny the country's children are forced into the cotton fields to perform heavy labour. They say they volunteer to bring in the harvest out of patriotism and a sense of obligation to their homeland. "Human rights activists can think about violations of children's rights. It is not something for us to debate," said one education department official in the southern Kashkadarya region.

Report based on IWPR's Investigation: "[Patriotic](#)" Uzbek Child Labourers by K Ashurov & S Kurbanov in Samarkand; M Azamatova, M Boboev & T Karaev in Fergana, Tashkent and Karshi, respectively; G Bukharbaeva in Tashkent.

All photographs by Thomas Grabka, a photojournalist based in Berlin.

Location: [Uzbekistan](#)

Topic: [Children](#)

Focus: [Central Asia](#)

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