

Cotton Picking Blues

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The Tashkent authorities would prefer that children forsake the classroom for the cotton fields

It may seem like a schoolkid's dream. In spring and autumn, the local authorities call on all pupils and students to put down their books and pens and then close down the classrooms.

"We're off cotton picking," chant the kids as they ride off in trucks to the fields at seven in the morning for their 11 hour, unpaid day. The jubilant reaction to being let off school palls as the harvest drags on into the winter months.

"When we were young, we used to do it, so let our children do the same," said one mother as if it were quite normal behaviour. But, with more and more children being press-ganged into harvesting Uzbekistan's crop, concerns over their welfare is growing.

As one teacher from the region commented, "It looks as if, for our state, cotton is more important than educated people." Cotton is king in Uzbekistan. The country is the world's second biggest producer and derives nearly a billion US dollars for the million tonnes it exports.

But, according to some, the exploitation of the child labour force has gone too far. US legislation could soon present the authorities with a tricky ultimatum. Either stop using children or face an embargo from your biggest importer.

Last spring, US embassy official John Paul Shutte visited the region of Jizak in central Uzbekistan, where he expressed US concerns. His choice of Jizak could well have been made because around 25,000 children from the region are being hauled from the classroom to the fields.

This is twice the number as last year. Which is probably in response to a government decree, issued at the end of 2000, demanding an increase in production to compensate for a drop in world cotton prices.

In order to do this, strict quotas at a regional level are broken down to targets for individual "working brigades" - all of which are monitored closely by officials of varying stature who face dismissal if targets aren't met. And no excuses are acceptable.

In tones reminiscent of the agricultural plans of Soviet days, the government has decreed that nothing should get in the way of achieving the quotas: forget water shortages, poor soil, adverse weather conditions - all of which led to a shortfall of 600,000 tonnes last year.

"It's everybody's duty to his homeland to participate in the cotton campaign," said Jizak's deputy governor Ubaidula Yamankulov, who is fully behind vacating the classroom in order to meet the government targets. "If a person has brains and desire to study, he will find time for education," said Yamankulov.

Human Rights activists in the region Bakhtior Khamraev contests this, saying the use of child labour is even worse than in the days of the Soviet Union. "Now they've gone too far," he said. "Things were never like this before - it's unheard of to drag children away from their studies to weed the cotton fields just

before their end of year exams."

Khamraev has conducted a survey that shows children are now spending just a fraction of the school year in the classroom. The only schooling they get is in the winter. And last year they were even denied that because of the lack of heating in the schools.

Normally, they are out in the fields harvesting from September till the end of the year. Come May they are in the fields again tending to the crops, taken there in trucks bearing placards with the slogans, "2001 - Year of the Healthy Generation".

Which Khamraev finds risible, "What kind of healthy generation are we going to raise?"

Health officials agree: things were better before independence, they say. The authorities, in their relentless drive to get as many hands to work as possible have now stated that no one can skip work on health grounds and that doctors' slips exempting workers on health grounds are not to be given out.

Worse, it seems the governor's office has given strict instructions that anyone injured during the harvest shouldn't be permitted hospital treatment. It seems that this would cast the cotton-picking policy in a bad light. And that includes children, of course.

On the morning of May 10, on the Jizak - Pakhtakor road, 12 children from eighth grade were seriously injured after a car collided with the truck taking them to the fields. Seven were sent home immediately.

Four of the five admitted to the Jizak accident and emergency unit were released later that day. When Adolat Khakimova pleaded with staff for her daughter Yuldus to be kept in, Dr Ilkham Iunusov told her that he had received instruction from the governor's office to discharge all the children.

They were concerned that the accident might become public. That night, blood started to drip from Yuldus's ear. She was re-admitted and is currently on a critical list with internal head injuries.

The authorities tried to absolve themselves of any responsibility for the incident by explaining that the bus trip was a private deal struck between the driver and the school's principal.

In two other workplace accidents, a child drowned and another died from hypothermia. Such tragedies may prompt the international community into pressuring the government into changing its policy. For sure, domestic protests have fallen on deaf ears. A Jizak polytechnic student said that a planned protest last year had been stopped when students were threatened with imprisonment.

Pupils who refuse to participate in the harvest are threatened with expulsion, while those who show willing need have no fear of end of year examinations - a pupil's performance in the fields is going to be reflected in his results. Most people are resigned to the cotton drill and even if they resent it, are too frightened to speak out.

Whether the US and anticipated European legislation changes the Uzbek policy remains to be seen. But, for the time being, at seven every morning, children are going to be piling onto trucks bearing this year's slogan paying homage to the president.

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