

## **International Traders Urged to Shun Uzbek Cotton**

Despite government assurances, children reappeared in the fields last autumn and this spring. Human rights activists from Uzbekistan are calling for the international boycott of cotton to be stepped up.

Over the last couple of years, a successful campaign highlighting the use of child labour in Uzbekistan led to leading textile industry associations and clothing retailers including Wal-Mart, Tesco and Marks & Spencer abandoning the use of cotton sourced from the country.

Now 47 leading activists and concerned citizens of Uzbekistan have signed a letter asking the European Union and the United States to refuse to allow imports of products made from Uzbek cotton, and urging commodity traders not to buy from Uzbekistan.

The letter was released to coincide with World Day Against Child Labour on June 12.

Between 1.6 and 2.4 million children between the ages of ten and 15 are believed to work in the cotton fields during the growing and harvesting seasons every year. Schools close altogether for two months and pupils are sent out to pick cotton seven days a week.

“School pupils are forced to do cotton work from September until the end of November,” said a human rights activist in the western Samarkand region. “That has to affect the quality of education in the schools.”

The government of Uzbekistan used to deny the existence of child labour, but this position became unsustainable in the face of the growing industry boycott and campaign.

In early September 2008, therefore, it formally enacted two international conventions banning child labour which Uzbekistan had ratified earlier in 2008. The government also approved a national action plan for enforcing the minimum working age. The new rules mean that minors under the age of 15 cannot be employed, including in cotton farming.

The authorities went on to assert that no children were now working in the fields. However, within a few weeks that pledge had demonstrably been broken, according to a recently-released report by the London-based Environmental Justice Forum, EJF, entitled “Still in the Fields”.

“EJF considers Uzbekistan to be unique for the scale of its system of state-sponsored forced child labour,” said the report. “Uzbekistan appears to dwarf others [other Central Asian states] both in the magnitude of the abuse and, despite mounting international pressure, the government’s reluctance to recognise and address the causal factors behind forced child labour.”

The report, based on field research, says children work under difficult conditions for pitiful levels of pay. Their health is at risk, and the report alleges that at least five children died last year for work-related reasons.

In response to the report, Uzbek human rights defenders said in their open letter that despite all the evidence, "The authorities publicly and routinely deny the existence of massive exploitation of children as well as their own involvement in it."

Since the government reinforced its ban on child labour last autumn, it has insisted the problem – if there was one – is a thing of the past. Officials have stated that if any children were sighted in the fields during the 2008 harvest, they must have been working for their parents, and the government cannot control how families organise their farm work.

Akmal Saidov, who heads the National Centre for Human Rights, told a United Nations meeting last December, "According to the law, [private] farms are independent entities. The state cannot therefore bear responsibility if children work in farmers' cotton fields."

However, as the "Still in the Fields" report says, "The children EJF met stated that the 2008 harvest was essentially the same as in previous years – the government announcements had made little difference to their lives."

The report suggested that Tashkent was well aware of what was going on, noting, "What has changed in 2008 is that independent monitoring of the situation has been severely curtailed by the presence of security personnel in the fields – the very people the Uzbek state claims to have instructed to enforce the law and protect the rights of children."

Human rights activist Gavhar Aripova confirmed the discrepancy between official statements and actual practice on the ground.

While interviewing children on farms she was approached by the local school head who told her they were merely helping out their parents.

"Yet I didn't see a single parent there," she said. "There were only children gathering cotton in rubber galoshes [but otherwise] barefoot in November."

Cotton is a key export commodity for Uzbekistan, which was the world's third largest exporter last year. Exports are handled by two quasi-state trading agencies, but the substantial hard-currency receipts for the state do not translate into improved incomes for the people who grow it.

Farmers in Uzbekistan are private operators but they remain beholden to the state because they hold their land on a long lease rather than in outright ownership. They continue to be subject to Soviet-style state quotas for planting and producing cotton, which they have to sell to the monopoly trading firms at prices far below the market rate. Selling cotton privately is treated as an illegal act.

The notionally private cotton sector is therefore managed as a giant state enterprise, and local and national government officials are tasked with "fulfilling the plan", through coercion and the use of child labour where necessary.

"It probably sound strange to anyone who isn't really familiar with our country, but it is the Office of the

Prosecutor General that is de facto tasked with managing the cotton industry in Uzbekistan,” said Tashpulat Yoldashev, an Uzbek analyst now living abroad. “Agricultural work is carried out under the total supervision of the police.”

Since farmers have to bear all the production costs – which they pay for at free market prices – yet can only sell at a fixed price, it is hardly surprising that they do not make much of a living from cotton.

“Not only do they not make a profit, they are often left in the red,” said Yoldashev.

One man in the central Jizak region explained the fairly universal means of survival for those who lease land and are made to grow cotton – he is able to set aside a small area of land to produce fruit and vegetables which he sells at the market.

A forcible consolidation under which groups of small farms were combined into one left numerous former leaseholders with neither land nor work, and no compensation for their investment, either.

Even the larger leaseholders cannot afford to offer decent wages to hired labourers, who prefer to find better paid work at home or frequently abroad.

With no change to the economics of cotton production, observers say child labour is likely to be unavoidable in the 2009 harvest.

People interviewed by IWPR last month said children were already being employed to sow cotton and weed the young plants.

Observers said local government had not been using overt coercion, but were instead resorting to financial incentives, requiring farmers to pay child workers 5,000 or 6,000 Uzbek soms, or four or five US dollars a day.

In their open letter, the human rights activists said the child labour problem would only be resolved if the government embarked on comprehensive reforms resulting in farmers being allowed to decide what to grow, who to sell it to, and for how much. So far, they say, there is no sign that this will happen.

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