

Tajik Prosecutors Investigate Child Labour Claims

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In what could be a test case, prosecutors have started looking into the widespread practice of using minors to work on cotton farms.

Prosecutors in southern Tajikistan are investigating allegations that school children have been taken out of their classrooms and sent to the cotton fields to work for little or no payment.

It is an open secret that children are used to gather cotton in Tajikistan and other Central Asian states, despite government directives ordering the practice to end. Producers are under pressure to fulfil government-set quotas for the commodity, which is a key export earner for Tajikistan, the poorest of the Central Asian republics.

Mirzo Fathulloev, head of the department for laws relating to minors at the Khatlon regional prosecutor's office, told IWPR that police had found evidence that local authorities instructed schools to send children from the sixth to the 11th grades to work in the fields at the end of May.

"The prosecutor's office has obtained a statement from the heads of Secondary School No. 8 in the Bokhtar district, to the effect that in pursuance of an order from the head of the jamoat [local government body] of the Faizali Saidov Farm, the schoolchildren were sent to shore up the cotton plants and weed the fields," he said.

Fathulloev said local education officials claimed that schools had organised summer camps where the children could have a holiday - and occasionally help out on the farm if they felt like it.

"But at these summer camps, the schoolchildren worked like adults from six in the morning onwards," he said.

The regional education department for Khatlon region, which covers most of southern Tajikistan, confirmed that schoolchildren had been sent to cotton farms in the Bokhtar, Khuroson, Vose, Nosiri Khusrav and Shahrituz districts.

Prosecutors say they are determined to pursue this case to the end,

"The local authorities broke the law, and they're confident that now the school year is over, the law-enforcement agencies will forget about this incident. But in September, when teachers and schoolchildren gather again, we will continue our investigation," said Fathulloev.

In the Bokhtar district, a major cotton-growing area near the southwestern city of Qurghonteppe, people say three schools including the one now under investigation deployed children as free farm labour in May.

They said children were being used because farmers were no longer prepared to work for little or no money, or to accept payment in kind in the form of dried cotton stalks, used as fuel in the Tajik countryside.

Vohidhuja Aslonov of the Khatlon regional agricultural department told IWPR that the authorities “have got used to forcing people to work for free like slaves, paying them in cotton stalks”.

Regional leaders in Tajikistan are under pressure to meet production targets for cotton, most of which is exported.

Although Tajikistan privatised farms in the Nineties, the land is still leased from the state, which gives the government a powerful instrument with which to force farmers to grow cotton rather than other crops.

Production has averaged less than half a million ton of raw cotton a year since 2001, but in 2004, the government approved a programme designed to raise output to 800,000 tons a year by 2015.

But instead of improving, production has dropped significantly over the last two years, due mainly to bad weather. In 2005, for instance, output was 448,000 tons instead of the anticipated 610,000 tons, while last year it slipped further to 443,000.

The Tajik government is a signatory to international conventions prohibiting the use of child labour, and officially opposes the practice. President Imomali Rahmon raises the issue every autumn at harvest time.

However, pressure to “fulfil the plan” coupled with severe manpower shortages – exacerbated by the exodus of hundreds of thousands of men who work as seasonal labour in Russia – means schoolchildren are still being forced into the fields to plant, tend and harvest the crop.

The International Organisation for Migration, 40 per cent of the cotton in Tajikistan is gathered by children for minimal remuneration – in some cases 20 US dollars for the three to four months of cotton harvesting.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund, this means that secondary school pupils in Tajikistan on average miss out on a third of the curriculum because they are out working in the fields. The work is backbreaking and the children risk health hazards such as the pesticides used on the crop.

In contrast to the general decline in output, Bokhtar district – with 60 per cent of its arable land under cotton – exceeded its target by 10 per cent last year, gathering 26,000 tons, and this year the plan is to hit 30,000 tons.

If this target is met, it will be thanks in part to child labour.

“We worked every day for three hours in the morning and at least two hours in the afternoon, but we have not been paid for our work yet,” said one pupil at the secondary school now being investigated by prosecutors.

Abubakr Choriev, a resident of Navbakhor in the Bokhtar district, said his brother, a teacher, was

instructed to take his pupils to a farm to tend the cotton plants.

“We asked him to refuse... but he said he had no choice, because on the first day, the school principal had refused to send the pupils out to the fields and got a reprimand from the district education department the next day and had to send the children to work,” he said.

Choriev dismissed claims by local officials that some children had volunteered as a way of earning pocket money, and others were helping their parents out.

“We live in the village of Navbahor, but our children get sent to a neighbouring farm instead,” he said. “The local authorities are abusing their powers and using children to do difficult work.”

Choriev said the fields where the children were sent belonged to farms where the staff were refusing to work because they had not been paid either this year or last.

“Last year, we weren’t paid a penny for our work,” said one of these farmers. “This year, most of the farmers abandoned their share of the lease, and there was no one left to work in the cotton fields. I myself didn’t want to keep working in return for cotton stalks.”

Children in other parts of Tajikistan tell similar stories of exploitation, and say they could not refuse if they wanted to because the small amount they are paid still represents vital income for their families.

Talab Najimiddinov, who is in the seventh grade at school in Khatlon’s Kolkhozobod district, works the fields together with his sister in return for the equivalent of a few dollars or foodstuff such as flour.

Their father died some years ago, and their mother gets only a small pension. The family has one hundred square metres of land, granted in return for helping out on the farm, and they use the plot to grow vegetables to eat.

“We work because it’s impossible not to,” said Talab. “If we don’t... we might lose this piece of land.”

In the Qabodiyon district, also in the south of Tajikistan, women and adolescents are working the fields even though it is noon and the sun is fiercely hot.

“I belong to the farm so I work on the fields. I don’t earn any money, and I didn’t know I was supposed to be paid,” said Savrigul Shernazarova, a ninth-grade pupil who attends the local school. “Sometimes the thermometer goes over 40 degrees.”

The work the children have done so far is only a prelude to the usual mass turnout that is expected for the autumn harvest. It remains to be seen whether the practice will be curtailed if prosecutors in Bokhtar district wind up their investigation and launch what could be a precedent-setting prosecution.

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