

## **Targets Set for Uzbek 'Slaves'**

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Students press-ganged into gathering republic's vital cotton harvest have now been ordered to meet daily quotas.

Sixteen-year-old Shukhrat, an 11th grade student from the Jizak region, will never forget his first season as a "cotton slave" at a collective farm in the Duslik district.

After he and his classmates were forced to break off from their studies to take part in the harvest of the country's most important commercial crop, Shukhrat fell ill on October 20, around a month before the official end of the picking season.

On that day, he suffered severe stomach pains and was able to gather only a fraction of the daily quota of cotton required of him. As a result, he alleges that he was sworn at by teaching staff overseeing the students, then beaten by them until he lost consciousness.

The police were contacted and took notes on the boy's condition, but no further action was taken and the teachers implicated in the crime were back at work the following day.

One of those involved in the alleged beating, Akram Soliev, said the children were treated roughly because this was the only way to ensure that hard work was carried out and discipline upheld.

"[The children] will never gather cotton if they are treated kindly, and if we cannot fulfil the state quota, we will be reprimanded by officials," he shrugged.

In the Jizak region alone, nearly 35,000 students from schools and higher education institutes are pressured into taking part in the cotton harvest - which has been a horrific experience for many of them - because farmers are unable to recruit workers for the arduous and poorly-paid task.

As well as having to endure cold, hunger and miserable living conditions, the students claim they are punished - sometimes severely beaten - if they fail to pick a compulsory daily quota of 50 kilogrammes of cotton.

Uzbekistan has long used child labour to help with the harvest, but this year was the first time they have been set such targets.

The move has prompted human rights groups - who allege that young people have fallen badly ill, and died in accidents, while working in the fields - have renewed their calls for "cotton slavery" to be outlawed. The authorities have repeatedly refused to speak to IWPR about the practice.

Cotton brings in around 1.5 billion US dollars a year - half the republic's export income - making Uzbekistan the fifth-largest producer and second-largest exporter of the crop in the world.

The children are forced to work in the fields because farmers cannot afford to pay agricultural workers

decent wages to gather the cotton.

Many teachers abhor the practice but claim they risk losing their jobs if they speak out.

For instance, at the beginning of the harvest, Mamlakat Ishimova, the head of a school in the Zarbdar area, was ordered to send 169 pupils to the fields. She objected, asking for a lesser number to be involved, but this was turned down.

The next day, Ishimova took 150 of her students to work, allowing weak and sick ones to go home - which prompted the local authorities to sack her.

"An official told me, 'If a pupil is sick, then let him die in the field'," claimed Ishimova.

According to other teachers who worked alongside their pupils in the cotton fields, only a handful of children were capable of fulfilling the 50 kg target, while others suffered under the harsh conditions and fell ill.

Many girls were accommodated in ramshackle buildings without hot water, with the result that many caught colds and flu.

One teacher from the Physical Education College in Jizak, who did not want to be named, told IWPR that many children simply ran away. "There were a lot of reasons for this. It is hard labour and they are not provided with elementary living conditions or fed properly," he said.

"On October 18, during a lunch break, the schoolchildren found a dead rat in the pot. On that day, 20 of them ran away."

Those who abscond face expulsion from their place of study when caught. Takhir Khamrakulov, director of Jizak's industrial college, said of the 100 students that ran away - about one third of those who absconded across the region - five have already been expelled and the rest should pay a fine.

Despite the imposition of a daily quota, agriculture ministry figures show the amount of cotton gathered this year was 300,000 tons short of the 3.2 million target.

The Samarkand Centre of Human Rights Initiatives, SCHRI, and other activists appealed to President Islam Karimov to halt the use of children during the cotton harvest after four young people were killed in 2002.

According to data gathered by the SCHRI, at least two students died during the 2003 harvesting season in the Samarkand region, where youngsters were also taken en masse to gather cotton.

Navruz Akaboev reportedly died from a head wound after some of his fellow pupils began throwing lumps of hard earth at each other. Three days later, Davur Shodiev is said to have been killed in an accident involving a tractor and a cart.

"Davur was my third child," said his father Umirboi. "He was a very happy and diligent boy. Who will give

my child back to me now? Who ordered the children to be sent to gather cotton?"

**Location:** Central Asia  
Uzbekistan  
Turkmenistan  
Tajikistan

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**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/targets-set-uzbek-slaves>