

Turkmen Leader Takes Officials to Task for Cotton Disgrace

Author: IWPR

The Turkmen president's blanket ban on drafting in public-sector workers to help with the cotton harvest will have far-reaching effects on attempts to fulfil a production target that already looks beyond reach. For many years, it was the usual practice to take university students and school pupils from their studies to work as free labour gathering cotton. Following criticism from the United Nations, the authorities have reduced the use of child labour. In their place, there has been a rising trend for public-sector workers in urban areas to be sent out to the fields, and Turkmenistan's army has become effectively a conscript labour force deployed in agriculture and other sectors.

This policy seemed to have tacit approval from the highest level, as officials struggled to bring in the cotton crop, the country's major export earner along with natural gas.

However, addressing an October 6 cabinet meeting, President Saparmurat Niazov outlawed the practice, telling his regional governors, "None of you should take [personnel] from state organisations, schools or private enterprises to gather the cotton harvest. The cotton must be picked by those who planted it - or be allowed to rot. But I will hold you responsible."

Nor were soldiers to be used as free labour, said Niyazov, who said he personally must authorise any decision to deploy them. He said he had already told his defence minister and border guards chief off, suggesting that they were disposing of conscripts as if they were their own children.

When the cabinet meeting was shown on state television, many viewers breathed a huge sigh of relief - although some suspected the president's underlings would find a way to get round the instruction.

Two days later it was a Sunday, when the streets would normally have been empty because everyone had been dragged off to work in the fields even though it was a day off. But the eastern city of Turkmenabat was full of people going about their own affairs.

Until then, people across the country had been working the cotton fields since the harvest began in late August.

One teacher in the city recalled how the headmaster had gathered his staff and told them they would have to take part in the harvest, or else resign

An official in the city administration, which is responsible for organising the labour drive, said such "volunteers" have been sent out in their thousands, usually for ten day stints, after which they are replaced by another group. While they are away, their colleagues have to cover for them as best they can.

The recruits have to bring their own rations because the food provided locally is totally inadequate. They do get paid, but only 500 manats or 10 US cents for every kilogram that they collect - a tenth of the rate that farmers received from the monopoly government buyer.

Sometimes people have found inventive ways round the problem. For example, at one hospital the chief doctor ruled that his staff could not leave their posts, so they found “doubles” – unemployed people whom they paid to take their place.

Factory managers were heard expressing their relief that the president had halted the usual exodus of workers to the fields. Prior to the change, one reported being in the absurd position of having to account to the authorities for two contradictory plans simultaneously – his provision of workers for the harvest, and progress on his own production plan, which was unattainable as he had virtually no staff left.

It may, however, be too soon for people to relax. Some analysts are suggesting that ways will be found to circumvent the free labour ban.

One possible method relies on a previous presidential order, which required state institutions to rent land from farms. Although this has meant little in practice so far, it could now be used as a way of getting the “leaseholders” – ie factory workers and other public service workers – back into the fields to work “their land”.

Another possibility is that public sector managers will withhold part of their workers’ salaries as “voluntary contributions” to pay for hired labour.

Contrary to past practice of reporting successful production figures whatever the reality, the president himself said the 2006 cotton harvest so far was “disgraceful”. According to Turkmen statisticians, as of October 9, less than a third of the target figure had been gathered in.

In a reflection of this new frankness, Niyazov accused the governor of Ahal Region, Amandurdy Muratgulyev, of trying to tamper with his region's cotton harvest statistics. "Do you understand that you were trying to commit a crime?" Niyazov asked him.

Niyazov’s admission that the harvest is failing and his attempt to impose some order on the cotton sector may come too late to save this year’s harvest. But his frankness may indicate a growing realisation that the economy is being undermined through poor management, covered up by fraudulent reporting.

The president placed the blame firmly on his regional governors, who he said had earlier boasted that cotton planting and harvesting was going well.

At the same time, he seems to have offered them a way out, issuing an order allowing them to reclaim land rented by private farmers whose performance is deemed unsatisfactory. The governors – and the military – will then be free to use their own “resources”, presumably meaning manpower deployed from elsewhere, to pick any cotton still left on these lands.

Focus: [Turkmen Radio - Inside View](#)

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