

## **Uzbek Child Labour Scandal**

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Tens of thousands of Uzbek children are being used as cheap labour in the country's cotton harvest

For thousands of Uzbek pupils and students, the cotton season - now in full swing - means two months of hard toil in the fields.

Because over 80 per cent of Uzbekistan's cotton is picked by hand, the state relies on such cheap labour. Youngsters who refuse to harvest the crop are threatened with expulsion from school or college.

This agrarian republic is the world's fifth-largest cotton producer. The crop is a precious source of hard currency. But poor harvests, due to bad weather and a fall in international prices have seen the republic's exports fall dramatically. According to government figures, one million tons of cotton was worth \$887 million, compared to \$1.5 billion two years ago.

As a result, the government is reducing payments to kolkhoz (collective farm) producers in order to continue to export profitably. Typically, a producer will receive \$230 for a ton of the crop, which the government will sell on the international market for around \$1,600.

Bitter at such unfair treatment, the kolkhoz are now refusing to hire seasonal workers, even though thousands of Uzbekistan's unemployed would leap at the chance. Instead, the collective farms are insisting on using students and schoolchildren as cheap labour.

In Djizak district, about 25,000 youngsters are labouring in the fields, as are over 3,000 higher education students. Their accommodation is rudimentary, often tarpaulins next to fields.

Forced to wash in the open air and given poor food, it's not surprising that the children's health suffers. In some oblasts, hepatitis and flu are common.

The governor of Djizak oblast recently announced that no schoolchildren should be exempted from their cotton-picking duties, even on the grounds of poor health. He also said work could be found for pregnant young women.

Nadira Kadyrova, a second-year student at a technical institute, succumbed to extreme exhaustion. When she failed to pick enough cotton, she was severely reprimanded by the kolkhoz boss. She threw herself into a canal, and was saved by passing students.

Cases of suicide amongst the cotton-picking students are not uncommon.

According to lawyer Lubov Matitsina, forcing students to pick cotton is in direct contravention of the UN Convention on the rights of children, of which the Uzbek government is signatory.

"Legally, children can only work under the age of 14 with the permission of their parents, and that's out of school hours," said Matitsina. "A 15-year-old can get working papers, but still needs parental permission.

During the cotton-picking season, this is given by the head teacher instead."

Cotton-picking infringes students' educational rights, said Matitsina, as schools and colleges are effectively closed during the season. Younger classes are exempt from the harvest, but don't study because their teachers are out in the fields too.

If a parent went to court to stop the compulsory removal of children for the harvest, said Matitsina, the case would be a sure winner. In the town of Chirchik, the parents of eighth grade children took the head teacher to court, and their children were left alone. But ninth to eleventh grade children were still taken off to pick cotton.

For several years now, the state has stopped taking children from Tashkent, probably because of the vocal presence of various international organisations in the city. People in the capital are also more aware of their rights than provinces.

In Djizak, schoolchildren were forced to sign a declaration stating that they were volunteering for the harvest.

Institutions dress up child labour as a "voluntary desire" to aid the republic - one bureaucrat called cotton-picking "children's sacred duty."

This year's harvest is forecast to reap 3.9 million tons, much of it picked by youngsters. The profits, though, will almost certainly never find their way back to schools or colleges, but will remain in the pockets of the government, which feels no obligation to tell its workforce what the fruit of their labour is spent on.

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