

Uzbek Region Tightens Up on Cotton

Author: [an IWPR](#)

The enticing prices fetched by cotton in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan means Andijan is particularly prone to smuggling.

The authorities in the Andijan region of eastern Uzbekistan are taking steps to ensure this autumn's cotton harvest is better organised than before and that none of the crop goes astray.

But cotton industry insiders predict that theft and redirection of the crop will remain a problem as long as farmers can command a higher price in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan.

Prompted by a disappointing harvest last year, the authorities in Andijan have introduced a raft of new measures to increase controls over the cotton crop, making picking more efficient and reducing the opportunity for theft and smuggling.

While farmers in Uzbekistan work in the private sector, they are still required to meet Soviet-style production quotas for cotton and grain, which they then have to sell to state purchasers at artificially low prices.

Uzbekistan is the world's second-largest exporter of raw cotton, and Andijan is an important producing area. It lies close to the border with Kyrgyzstan and so has a particular problem with farmers smuggling cotton into the neighbouring country where they can get a higher price.

This autumn, the regional authorities will pioneer a new team-based approach to harvesting cotton to make the process more efficient and ensure the crop does not go astray before it reaches the official collection points.

In a local TV programme, Andijan provincial governor Ahmadjon Usmonov outlined how the new system - already being used to harvest grain - should work.

A total of 1,500 teams of around 150 harvesters each will be assigned to farms across the region. Team leaders appointed by local authorities will manage the whole process - organising harvesters, arranging collection of the crop, and transporting it to delivery centres. A policeman and prosecution service worker will be assigned to each team to oversee the work, and a doctor, nurse and mechanical engineer will also be on hand to make sure nothing holds up the work.

Usmonov cited as an example one team which will consist of farm workers and local residents and be led by a school headmaster in the Bulakbashi district.

The idea is that opportunities for theft will be reduced as once gathered, the cotton will no longer lie in the fields overnight, but will be delivered to collection points immediately by a specially-appointed delivery person accompanied by a senior team leader and a policeman. A receipt for the delivery will be issued in triplicate.

The increased vigilance and controls are intended to stamp out the widespread practice of recording inflated amounts when cotton is delivered.

In an environment where failure can mean summary dismissal, local government is held responsible for “meeting the plan” even when external factors such as drought or rain make that impossible. Pressure to meet Soviet-style targets often prompts local officials to collude in fabricating glowing reports, so that the aggregate national production figures may be based on flimsy ground.

According to official reports, Andijan region fell short of its quota by 14 per cent last year.

In a recent media interview, Bahodir Mamajanov of the Andijan regional department for agriculture said the presence of a police officer at crop delivery points would prevent farmers bribing officials to issue papers showing they had fulfilled their quotas.

Meanwhile, Uktam Haidarov, an official from the regional body that coordinates “mahallas” or neighbourhood committees – the lowest rung of local government – said the mahallas would post a member at every kilometre along the border with Kyrgyzstan in an effort to stop smuggling. They will join the thousands of police and border guards on what is already a fairly well secured stretch of Uzbekistan’s frontier.

Finally, the regional authorities have recruited the senior cleric in Andijan to add a spiritual dimension to the all-out campaign, which coincides with the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. Nuriddin Khaliknazarov is accompanying governor Usmonov on a tour of the region, giving sermons about the value of cotton and the virtue of honesty.

Meanwhile, central government has increased the incentives for both pickers and farm owners. A decree by Uzbek president Islam Karimov means that this year, farms will receive the equivalent of 323 US dollars per ton of first-class cotton – still less than a third of the world price which the government will earn from exports. Cotton pickers, who were formerly paid the equivalent of five to seven US cents for every kilogram they pick, will get a 20 per cent increase in wages.

However, a former director of a cotton-processing plant in Andijan predicted that tougher measures and higher purchase prices were unlikely to stop smuggling. He says that by moving the cotton into Kyrgyzstan, Uzbeks can get 20 Kyrgyz soms or 50 US cents per kilogram – several times the money that pickers are paid at home.

The former factory director, who asked not to be named, noted that less cotton has been planted in southern Kyrgyzstan than last year, which suggests that demand for the Uzbek product will grow.

The former factory director concluded that the financial rewards for smuggling cotton are still greater than the risks.

“If you bear in mind that there is corruption among the police and border guards, it’s reasonable to assume that there will be no less theft than there was last year,” he said.

A former government official who did not want to be identified noted that while the world price of cotton

has fallen in recent years, the way the industry is structured in Uzbekistan means that a small elite will continue to benefit from the export trade while paying little heed to farmers who eke out a poor existence from the small amount they earn as producers.

As prices of bread and other wheat products continue to reach record highs in Central Asia, the additional hardship this is causing seems likely to add to the temptation to defy the authorities and sell cotton abroad.

Location: Central Asia
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