

## **A CHRONICLE OF FORCED CHILD LABOUR: REPORTS FROM THE UZBEKISTAN COTTON HARVEST 2010**

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### **Uzbekistan: ‘Authorities from mayor’s office, prosecutor’s office and police are guarding the cotton fields’.**



As Elena Urlaeva the Uzbek human rights activist reports, in order to suppress information about forced child labour in Uzbekistan, troops from the mayor’s office, prosecutor’s office, and police are overseeing the cotton fields where children are working.

Elena Urlaeva told the BBC that in Upper Chirchik district children are picking cotton and they were instructed not to tell anyone that they are working in the fields. Police deleted pictures she had been taking using her mobile phone.

“Teachers of one of the schools in Upper Chirchik district called our organisation and reported that the schoolchildren are being taken to pick cotton for several days”, says Elena Urlaeva.

In order to find out about the situation, Elena Urlaeva went to the district which is not too far from Tashkent city and witnessed the cotton fields where children are working

under strict observation.

“Not only policemen, but also a group consisted of security service agents, authorities from prosecutor’s office and civilians in police and camouflage uniforms with transmitters in their hands are guarding every field. Even though it was Sunday yesterday, both children and teachers picked cotton until 5 pm in the afternoon. A group of law enforcement staff supervised them” says Ms Urlaeva.

“I went behind the field and crawled through the rows towards the children. Once I got there, I got up and started taking pictures”, says Elena Urlaeva.

According to children, they are forbidden to mention that they are picking cotton; the authorities instructed them to say that they are attending classes. In fact, they go to the schoolhouse in the mornings holding their bags, but inside the bags instead of books there is a piece of bread with a bottle of clean water to drink.

“Children complained to me that for four days they have been picking cotton, that their shoes are not suitable for fields, that their arms are scratched from the bushes and they are not given proper bags for cotton, and they have to use sacks to contain the picked cotton”, says the human rights activist.

Source: BBC, 20.09.2010

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/uzbekistan/2010/09/100920\\_new\\_child\\_labor\\_season.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/uzbekistan/2010/09/100920_new_child_labor_season.shtml)

## **Cotton picking has begun in Uzbekistan. There are already first victims.**

Seven people were killed on September 12th in an accident on the highway Urgench-Khiva (Khorezm region of Uzbekistan). A jeep "Chevrolet Captiva" crashed into a tractor trolley carrying the new cotton crop. Three cotton pickers and car passengers were killed.

This is not the first incident of death during the cotton harvest. Accidents happen during the harvest and are particularly deeply felt, as people do not go to the fields on their own will, but are sent there.

This year's weather conditions allowed for the growth of good cotton crops in Khorezm. In Uzbekistan, cotton is practically being picked without any machinery. In order to harvest before the cold weather, nearly all workers from government organizations and state-controlled businesses have been mobilized to work in the fields.

The exploitation of children is beneficial to state companies as it is profitable for them to buy cheap cotton in the country and sell at a high rate due to the price difference. Local administrations, school administrations, and farmers themselves also profit from the use of child labor.

For two decades now, the authorities forced millions of workers into the cotton fields. Sometimes, school children end up picking cotton during the cold month of November. They do not study, and then do not have time to catch up with students from the cities, in terms of educational opportunity.

In general, rural youth from poor families go to the fields. Most children in villages have anemia or gastrointestinal diseases, which are caused by poor nutrition and unhygienic surroundings. For failure to work, a child may be accused of being unpatriotic, may be dressed down and even be beaten. 2-3 teachers are responsible for the work of each class. In places of a mass gathering, the police is always nearby and responsible for maintaining order.

No one is responsible for the health of the cotton pickers.

Source: Ferghana.ru, 17.09.2010

<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=6729>

## **Fashion week in London, Uzbekistan is getting ready for cotton harvest...**

At the time when the cotton harvest season has begun in Uzbekistan, fashion week launched in London. Fashion shows will show clothing made of cotton as well.

The Environmental Justice Foundation urges textile companies and the media to keep the forced child labour in Uzbekistan in the centre of attention. "Unfortunately, despite the promises of the Uzbek government to discontinue the practice of forcing children to pick billion dollars worth harvest in the fields, the situation seems to remain the same", says the statement the Foundation made.

At the same time an Uzbek human rights organisation in Djizzakh reported that this year, minors have been involved in harvesting the cotton.

The human rights activist Bakhtiyor Khamroev told the BBC about the scale of sending children to cotton fields:

“From the 13th of September all lyceums, colleges and two universities were closed in Djizzakh province and schoolchildren and students are all sent to pick cotton. The age of the participating students from lyceums and colleges is 15- 17, all are underage minors. Many schoolchildren, for instance in Pakhtakor, Zafarobod, Arnasoy, and Dostlik districts were placed in school buildings. This year we are observing that forced labour intensified. It is related to the weather, as the rainy days have begun. For the last ten years we wrote more than 100 different correspondences to state authorities about illegal trafficking of children to cotton fields. Unfortunately, despite the laws and ratifications of international conventions, we have not observed any changes in this situation.”

Source: BBC, 17.09.2010

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/uzbekistan/2010/09/100917\\_cy\\_uzbek\\_cotton\\_eif.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/uzbekistan/2010/09/100917_cy_uzbek_cotton_eif.shtml)

## **Uzbekistan: In Samarkand taking students to cotton harvest has begun**

Since the 16th of September, students from higher education institutions are sent en masse to pick cotton in Samarkand. By the end of the week around 15 thousand students from six universities of Samarkand will be mobilized to cotton fields.

This year the cotton pickers in Samarkand will be paid 120 som (5-6 USD cents) per kilogram of cotton.

Just like previous years, before the start of cotton harvest campaign, hundreds of students try to find a way out of this labour service. Last year, a false medical certificate cost \$200-250.

Students can free themselves from taking part in cotton harvest only by sending “mardikors”- day laborers in their place. The work of such day laborers costs 5-7 dollars per day.

Every year, rural people cannot manage to harvest more than three million tons of “white gold” independently. University students, school children, and primary school children are sent to the fields. The traditional practice of forced child labour in Uzbekistan means to disrupt the study term for students and schoolchildren with physical labour for two- two and a half months.

Source: Ferghana, 16.09.2010

<http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=15552&mode=snews>

## **Children of poor pick cotton**

Listeners who call “Free Microphone” mainly talk about problems regarding the cotton season, abuse and violation by authorities and they conclude that this is their “destiny.”

Jasurbek from Khorezm called “Free Microphone” and said that schoolchildren were sent to pick cotton. “During the cotton season from mayor to heads of schools are not repulsed by the idea of improving their finances at the expense of children”, says Jasurbek.

- We would like to talk about cotton issues. Our brothers are all taken to pick cotton. Everyone takes advantage of the cotton season, from the mayor to school directors. How? For instance, if 100 children are supposed to go to pick cotton only 50 go. The school director charges the other 50 for not going. Only children of poor people go to pick cotton. Rich children pay the school director 100-150 thousand som. In his turn, the director passes on the money to the mayor of the district.

Radio Liberty: Which school grades go to pick cotton in Khorezm?

- Seventh grader and older go. Children younger than that age go during the day. They go in the morning and are brought back in the evening by bus. Children older than the seventh grade are taken for longer periods. There is neither water nor gas, or anything in the places they stay. The food they are fed is no good. There are no conditions at all. Children sleep in the cold. For example, rich people do not send their children. They know that they get sick there. The poor do not have 100- 200 thousand som to pay. Then they get sick in farm cottages. That is why our children have lots of illnesses, says Jasurbek from Khorezm. They go in the morning and are brought back on a bus in the evening.

Source: Ozodlik, 15.09.2010

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/2158699.html>

## **In Khorezm all educational institutions were closed and all is sent to pick cotton.**

On 13th of September, children were told that the harvest season began and there would not be any classes during this season, then the children went to fields again. Fifth through ninth grade children of secondary schools are gathered everyday at the school and are led by their teachers to pick cotton in the fields.

According to a fifth grader, contests are organised among the classes for picking the most cotton and the winner group is praised and encouraged by teachers on a daily basis. But schoolchildren are paid less than adults. They are paid 100 som per kg of cotton whereas the hired workers are getting paid 120 som per kg. Some of the schoolchildren are skipping working with the schools and are picking cotton with hired workers. Hired workers have confirmed this information.

Students of colleges and lyceums (14-16 years old) were sent to districts on buses for a long term work over several weeks. As farmers do not have special housing for students, the security rooms, storage rooms of the fields and some of the houses of local people were turned into temporary residences for them. In Yangibozor district 16-17 years old college students are picking cotton and staying the night in temporary camps. Their daily quota is 50 kg. Those who can't meet the quota are gathered in the evenings for questioning and are threatened with expulsion from school. The work day begins from 7 am in the morning till the dark with a short break for lunch.

The harvest season is expected to go on for one month.

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Feel free to disseminate these reports further and post them on your websites.

More reading:

FAQ: <http://www.cottoncampaign.org/frequently-asked-questions/>

Academic view of the subject: <http://www.soas.ac.uk/ccac/events/cotton-sector-in-central-asia-2005/file49842.pdf>

*Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights, 2010*, <http://www.uzbekgermanforum.org/>