

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

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### **Are German Firms Profiting from Modern Slavery**

Every autumn, children in Uzbekistan are forced to work in the cotton harvest, for little pay. German companies are among those profiting from this violation of human rights.

An obscure ritual dating back to the former Soviet command economy unfolds during the autumn harvest season in the Central Asian republic, when President Islam Karimov mobilizes the masses. About 2 million schoolchildren are then ordered to work in the fields and harvest the "white gold," as cotton has been known since the days of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. In addition to natural gas and gold, cotton is one of the most important sources of hard currency for the Uzbek elite. The price of cotton is currently at its highest since trading began 140 years ago.

The slightly older schoolchildren who were sent out to work in the area were even worse off. Their teachers simply kept some of the children's monthly wages. Those who didn't make their quotas were also beaten.

The sunny mood in the industry could be somewhat dampened this week. A complaint has been filed against seven European cotton dealers with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). According to the charge, the companies violated OECD principles for multinational companies by profiting from Uzbek child labor.

In Germany, the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) is filing a complaint against Stadtlander, a large European cotton dealer with over €100 million (\$138 million) in annual sales. For years, the company has had an office in Tashkent, where it maintains good relations with the Karimov government.

Stadtlander aids and abets human rights violations, says ECCHR coordinator Miriam Saage-Maass, but she notes that it's a challenging case. The management of Otto Stadtlander has ignored the ECCHR's inquiries for more than a year now, Saage-Maass adds. The company was unwilling to answer SPIEGEL's questions.

Stadtlander's good relationship with Uzbekistan is entirely in line with the German government's policies. A "new partnership" connects Germany to President Karimov, and German soldiers embark for Afghanistan from a German military base in Uzbekistan. This prompted many European countries to call for sanctions, but Germany didn't play along. Instead, German cabinet ministers paid visits to the country with large business delegations in tow.

The German government is unwilling to say how the partnership improved conditions for the children, but a spokeswoman mentions a "monitoring system" and "regular dialogue."

Source: Spiegel, 28.10.2010

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,725590,00.html>

## **The Cotton price hit the new record**

Last Friday, the price of cotton per kg has reached up to 2.83 USD according to the Cotton Outlook scale.

Ray Butler, the editor of the magazine published by the Cotton Outlook centre which researches the cotton market and who has been at the International Cotton Exhibition in Tashkent gave an interview to Radio Liberty:

“Needs for cotton have been remaining quite high. Despite that the cotton season 2009- 2010 has just been finished, the world cotton resources have been reduced for 3 million tones, says the head of the Cotton Outlook research centre.

This year was not a very good one for those countries which purchase cotton, on the other hand it was very profitable for countries which export it, says Ray Butler, the head of the Cotton Outlook research centre.

At the cotton exhibition the Uzbek government declared that in the next 5 years the cotton export would be reduced by 30 per cent and instead, the remanufacturing would be developed in the country.

The textile companies in Uzbekistan who have been complaining about the lack of cotton fibre for years have accepted this news as a good sign.

When asked if the statement on reducing cotton export might be connected to the criticism on using forced child labour in Uzbekistan and whether it was reliable that the export reduction will truly happen, Ray Butler answered:

“This issue is beyond my expertise. I do not know anything about it”.

Source: Ozodlik, 18/10/2010

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/2194058.html>

## **True cotton growers didn't get “thank you”**

On 15<sup>th</sup> of October the President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, congratulated the “cotton growers and workers” for the fulfillment of the yearly cotton quota. But the President never mentioned the students, schoolchildren, and public servants who worked hard in the cotton fields.

“Today is a happy day for our people. Cotton growers of our country have harvested 3 million 400 thousand tons of cotton and achieved a great victory”, begins the congratulation speech of Islam Karimov.

According to Bakhtiyor Khamroev, a human rights activist from Djizzakh, Karimov never wanted to acknowledge the fact that young children have been involved in the cotton harvest, therefore he did not mention them in his speech on purpose.

“If he announced that with the help of students so much cotton has been harvested, it could mean ‘yes

we use child labour'. That's why they never add such lines to his speech", says Bakhtiyor Khamroev.

Islam Karimov also mentioned that this year the profit from the cotton industry is expected to be over 2 trillion soms, and it would exceed the amount from last year in 35 per cent.

Jakhongir Rakhmatov, a farmer from Navoi, does not think that peasants or farmers are becoming any wealthier from growing cotton:

"What wealth? It is good enough if they earn to cover all their work. The land belongs to the government. It is rented to farmers. Before, the lease was for 25- 50 years, now even that has been reduced. Secondly, the cotton also belongs to the government. They make contracts with cotton manufacturing factories. The factories belong to the government. They make contracts to sell the cotton for a certain amount; around 300-500 soms", says the farmer who used to grow cotton in the past.

Bakhtiyor Khamroev also talks about the profit the students and public service personnel made of picking cotton:"

The wages students and schoolchildren received for the cotton they picked was barely enough to pay for their food. Many students even owe the government for the food they provided during the cotton harvest season", reports Bakhtiyor.

According to him, those who were sent to pick cotton still haven't returned from the fields. He says that it will continue for another 10-15 days before they return; until then the students will still be picking cotton.

Source: Ozodlik, 16.10.2010

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/2192306.html>

### **In Djizzakh, the schoolchildren returning from cotton fields had a car accident**

In the Djizzakh district, a "RAF" mini bus carrying schoolchildren back from the fields crashed with another car and as a result Marhabo Sodikova, the 34 years old school teacher, died on the scene.

Four heavily injured schoolchildren were taken to the emergency hospital of Djizzakh.

The tragedy has taken place on 20<sup>th</sup> of October, around 17:00 o'clock, in the territory of Khamid Olimjon farm which belongs to the Dzizzakh district.

According to Mamir Azimov, a human rights activist in Dzizzakh, a "VAZ" car has crashed against the mini bus which was carrying 15 schoolchildren of the School #12 .

As a result, the schoolteacher Markhabo Sodikova died on the scene of the accident. Mamir Azimov also notes that teachers and schoolchildren have fully become the source of cheap labour for local authorities, and that during the cotton season even the safety of those cheap labourers was not provided.

"In the morning when all the schoolchildren gathered, usually there is a traffic police and authorities of the school to monitor the departure of children to the allocated fields. They stop heavy trucks on the road and send children with those trucks; they do not care of the rest. Those farmers who can afford it help with the transportation of the children. Those children who worked for farmers who cannot help with the transportation had to return on foot after the day of hard work", says Mamir Azimov.

Source(s): BBC an Ozodlik, 21.10.2010

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/uzbekistan/2010/10/101021\\_cv\\_jizzakh\\_cotton\\_incident.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/uzbekistan/2010/10/101021_cv_jizzakh_cotton_incident.shtml)

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/2197340.html>

### **District officials crash after cotton meeting in Jizak Region**

Officials of the Jizak Region's Zarbdor District received serious injuries during a crash in the night of 12<sup>th</sup> of October as they were driving home after a meeting in which the course of the cotton-harvesting campaign was discussed.

The government in Tashkent demands that the regional authorities fulfill targets in supplying cotton to the state, or instead face dismissals.

Each night heads of all kinds of organisations, including medical ones, take part in meetings that analyze the successes and failures of the campaign.

After one of these meetings, in the night of 12<sup>th</sup> of October, while driving the chief doctor of the Zarbdor District hospital, Jurabek Ismailov, and the deputy head of the district, Olim Kulmatov, a driver suffering from lack of sleep lost control of his brand-new ambulance car, which got off the road and overturned.

Both officials are now in intensive care with numerous bone fractures. The accident has endangered the future of their families, as it is unclear whether the officials will survive.

"How many more people have been hurt because of the authorities' brutal attitude to the cotton industry in Uzbekistan?", local observers asked.

Source: [Uznews.net](http://uznews.net), 15.10.2010

[http://www.uznews.net/news\\_single.php?lng=en&sub=usual&cid=2&nid=15225](http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=en&sub=usual&cid=2&nid=15225)

### **British diplomats toadying to Uzbek dictator's daughter**

British Ambassador to Uzbekistan Rupert Joy and the Director of the British Council in Uzbekistan Steve McNulty, participated in Gulnara Karimova's fashion week, held in Tashkent from October 9<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup>. Former UK ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray has heavily criticized their attendance.

The [style.uz](http://style.uz) fashion week, which is organized by the Uzbek President's daughter, is taking place simultaneously with the country's cotton-picking campaign, which is enslaving millions of Uzbek children.

"Rupert Joy should be deeply ashamed of himself," says Murray. He warned that one should be careful in Uzbekistan with everything linked to the cotton industry, because it relies on forced adult labour and on child slavery.

Cotton trade in Uzbekistan is extremely profitable for the country's elite. They use almost no capital equipment and rely heavily on forced labour guaranteeing huge profits.

"Gulnara is at the top table of those who gain from this exploitation," says Murray.

Craig Murray is convinced that Karimova wants to improve her image in order to strengthen her political ambitions. One of the means of doing this is to involve ambassadors of countries, that enjoy a good reputation in the world, in her events.

Juliet Williams, the founding director of the London-based Environmental Justice Foundation, said she was saddened by the British diplomats' attendance at the fashion week, since it is legitimizing the dictatorial regime in Uzbekistan and the exploitation of children.

But also big fashion names such as Prada, MaxMara and Oscar de la Renta overlooked the human rights abuses the country is known to have by attending the event.

Source: [Uznews.net](http://uznews.net), 14.10.2010, 19.10.2010

[http://www.uznews.net/news\\_single.php?lng=en&sub=usual&cid=31&nid=15203](http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=en&sub=usual&cid=31&nid=15203)

[http://www.uznews.net/news\\_single.php?lng=en&sub=hot&cid=31&nid=15268](http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=en&sub=hot&cid=31&nid=15268)

## For Exploited Uzbek Farmers, High Cotton Prices Only Enrich Overlords

Mamurjon Azimov and his family have worked as cotton farmers for years in Uzbekistan's Jizzakh region. But last year, because of his heavy debts, Azimov was kicked off the land he was renting from the state.

Now unemployed and trying to feed his family of five, Azimov blames an almost feudal agricultural system in Uzbekistan that enriches only a handful of the political elite who have ties to President Islam Karimov. It is a system that effectively turns farmers into bonded slaves who are trapped into working for little pay in order to repay their debts.

"The price of cotton is defined at the beginning of every year [by the state]. The wages paid for picking cotton are set [by the state] just before the harvest begins. That's it," Azimov says. "What happens on the international market doesn't matter to farmers. No one will pay [the farmers] extra if the price of cotton goes up. If the international market price rises, [it is the officials who] reap all the benefits."

Other cotton farmers in Uzbekistan interviewed by RFE/RL agree that they will not see any benefit from international cotton prices that soared this week to more than \$1.20 per pound - the highest level ever on the global market.

By law, Uzbekistan's farmers must then sell their cotton to the state-controlled company that operates all of Uzbekistan's cotton gins - Uzhklopkoprom - at a price set by the government.

Officially, the price offered is about one-third of the international market price. In practice, many farmers receive even less - as little as one-tenth the global price - because their high-grade cotton often is judged as "low grade" when it is collected by Uzhklopkoprom.

Uzbekistan's government owns 51 percent of Uzhklopkoprom. Information has never been released publicly about who owns the remaining 49 percent of the state cotton monopoly. But investigative reports by journalists and human rights groups suggest the privately held shares are controlled by Karimov's political allies and their relatives.

"The problem is that Uzbekistan still has a Soviet-style command economy," says Juliet Williams, director of Environmental Justice Foundation, a British-based nongovernmental organization. "Because farmers have no choice in what they are producing, they are part of an economy that is benefitting President Karimov and a small elite. Because it is such an opaque trade, anyone at the top of that elite is able to benefit."

Indeed, high international market prices for cotton are helping Karimov's regime consolidate its control over Uzbekistan's population. Instead of helping farmers who grow the crop, the record prices enrich powerful elites with ties to President Karimov's regime - a regime that bankrolls itself through totalitarian control over cotton production.

Source: RFERL, 27.10.2010

[http://www.rferl.org/content/For Exploited Uzbek Farmers High Cotton Prices Only Enrich Overlords/2202878.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/For_Exploited_Uzbek_Farmers_High_Cotton_Prices_Only_Enrich_Overlords/2202878.html)

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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/>*