

A CHRONICLE OF FORCED CHILD LABOUR: REPORTS FROM THE UZBEKISTAN COTTON HARVEST 2011

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Free Microphone. The Radio Liberty programme where the listeners call and share their opinions.

The mayor beats the farmers.

A listener from Mingbuloq district called us complaining that no measures are taken against violent authorities.

“Farmers are being beaten, or getting arrested for not fulfilling the plan”.

Said our listener who called from Namangan region’s Mingbuloq district and asked to stay unnamed he said that he works in a government job and he personally witnessed how the mayor beat the farmers.

- All the markets are closed, the shop owners and organisations all were sent to pick cotton, they beat farmers and arrest those who did not meet the targeted plan.

The Radio Liberty: Can you give us examples? Did you see it yourself?

- Yes, they don’t get beaten alone, the mayor hits them in front of 200-300 people. We for example, don’t know these farmers. They get called in a meeting and come, then the mayor beats them.

The Radio Liberty: Does the mayor beat them?

- Yes.

The Radio Liberty: How does he beat them? Slap, or kick them?

- He beats them as he wants, no one can raise a hand against him, if they do something, he sends auditors and finds something wrong and gets them arrested.

The Radio Liberty: Is beating and assaulting farmers still happening in these days?

- Yes.

The Radio Liberty: You said you attend meetings, are you also a farmer?

- I am not a farmer, I work in an organisation. All the organisations are forced to go to pick cotton, we have no choice but to go, so we have to deal with the situation,- says the caller from Mingbulok.

Source: Ozodlik, 12.10.2011

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24356396.html>

Uzbek workers reap rewards of higher wages on Kazakh cotton harvest.

Women from Uzbekistan are crossing into Kazakhstan en masse attracted by the higher wages paid for their labour in the annual cotton harvest.

In Kazakhstan, cotton workers have long been paid much more for their labour than in Uzbekistan. Each year at harvest time, Uzbek citizens – usually women and girls – go to pick cotton in the fields of southern Kazakhstan, where they are paid two or three times as much for a kilogram of cotton than in Uzbekistan.

At the beginning of September this year, several thousand people crossed into Kazakhstan via the border point at Yallama in Chinaz district (Tashkent Region) and set off to harvest cotton. The seasonal workers were mainly from Kokand and other districts of the Fergana valley, the most populous area of Uzbekistan.

For Uzbek guest workers Yallama is the easiest point at which to cross the border into Kazakhstan because of its geographical proximity to the Maktaaral, the main cotton producing province of Kazakhstan.

According to Suraya, who lives in a village close to the border crossing point, this year and also in late September 2010, thousands of people crossed into Kazakhstan via Yallama, but she claims that Uzbek border officials eventually stopped letting the migrant workers through to work in the Kazakh cotton fields.

Suraya claims that in Kazakhstan this year it was possible to earn (in Kazakh tenge) the equivalent of 300 Uzbek sums per kilogramme of cotton harvested, whereas in Uzbekistan the pay is just 150 sums.

Kazakh media outlets also report that in Kazakhstan, for picking one kilogramme of cotton, or ‘white gold’ as it is known, the rate is 25 tenge this year, which would equate to more than 400 Uzbek sums. (At unofficial market rates, the tenge was worth 16.7 sums on 17 October.) Experienced Uzbek cotton workers can harvest more than 100 kilogrammes of cotton per day, and therefore could be earning more than 2500 tenge daily.

Source: UzNews, 18.10.2011

http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=en&sub=hot&cid=0&nid=18165

“Ezgulik” filed a case of cotton harvest victim against a school.

A case has been filed against the school of Ahrorjon Abdumannonov, a student who died in a car accident a year ago on his way back from the cotton field.

On the eve of the accident, Ahrorjon was a 5th grade student in school # 25 in Pop District.

According to information spread by “Ezgulik” society, the case of Ahrorjon clearly a victim of the cotton harvest was down played as an unfortunate incident.

According to the director of “Ezgulik” society, which investigated the case of Ahrorjon, the organization filed a lawsuit against the administration of school #25 in Pop District regarding the case of Ahrorjon Abdumannonov.

“We do possess documents testifying his death. Moreover, we have a petition from his father which states: My son Ahrorjon Abdumannonov on October 12, 2010 was taken to the cotton field according to the order of administration of state’s secondary school #25 and died in a car accident on the way back from the field being left unattended”. He was a 10-year old 5th grader. The victim’s father has suffered severe pressure from the school administration. He was threatened with statements like “your other child is studying at the school”, “we will report to the local hokim. He will confiscate all your land.” A whole year passed, but neither aid was provided nor anything else was done. We have filed a case against the school administration. Court hearings will start on Monday,” says Vasila Inoyatova.

It was impossible to obtain any information regarding the case of Ahrorjon Abdumannonov neither from the administration of school #25 in Pop nor from the department of Domestic Affairs of Pop District.

According to “Ezgulik” society, each year more than 10 children fall victim to the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan.

“On September 24th, a 7th grader from school #24 in Chiroqchi District of Kashkadarya region was involved in a car accident. Last year, in Jondor, in Bukhara, two children were struck by a car. A number of similar

tragedies have happened In Karshi as well. Unfortunately, be the victim of the cotton harvest young or old, the government is not taking any action against it, “says Vasila Inoyatova.

According to Vasila Inoyatova, cases of cotton harvest victims like these are usually hushed up. “Ezgulik” society is doing its best to prevent the case of Ahrorjon being left unsolved.

Source: Ozodlik, 19.10.2011

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24364785.html>

Uzbekistan: Human rights defender Elena Urlaeva was released, but her flash disks were not returned to her.

The leader of the Human Rights Defenders Alliance of Uzbekistan, Elena Urlaeva, who was detained on the morning of the 19th of October was released from Yangiyul police office in Tashkent after three hours of detention.

Elena Urlaeva was detained while she was recording a empty school where schoolchildren were all sent to pick cotton.

According to Urlaeva, in Yangiyul district police office, they thoroughly searched her in presence of other detainees, but no protocol was made.

“They took my clothes off, were touching me looking for something. They didn’t tell me on what basis I was detained. They didn’t make any protocol despite my insistences. After three hours they took me through the backdoor of the police office, put me in a car and brought me to Tashkent”, reports Elena Urlaeva.

The human rights defender did not get her flash disk, which contained the empty school, back and instead, a few strange leaflets were placed in her belongings: “The leaflets are written in Uzbek. I don’t know why they put these leaflets and what information they contain, but I’m concerned that they might have done it to falsely frame me...” - she says.

After she was released, Elena Urlaeva disseminated a statement in which she said:

“On the 19th of October 2011 I was captured in the territory of school No.4 in Yangiyul district of Tashkent by the director of this school and a director of Auto College. They took away my camera by force and took the flash disk out of it. Then the head of the national education, police and security services arrived. I requested to take measures against the fact that all the schoolchildren are absent from the school and instead, the teachers of college are snoozing in the classrooms and the children as young as 5- 9th grade are in the fields, picking cotton, but all of the above mentioned authorities answered that children are helping the country and picking cotton...”

The human rights defender demanded to charge the director of the above mentioned school and all the others who helped him and were responsible for stealing the flash disk of her camera.

Source: FerganaNews, 19.10.2011

<http://www.fergananews.com/news.php?id=17483&mode=snews>

I am against cotton politics! The school dean from Olot says there is no reason to send children to pick cotton.

The dean of one of the schools in Bukhara region’s Olot district, Gaybulla Bektoshov, says that he has been harassed for telling that the children are in the cotton fields even though the teachers have been marking the attendance books.

- I am Bektoshov Gaybulla from Bukhara region Olot district’s No.4 school. I am a deputy of the school

director on educational matters. I contacted your radio on cotton issues and ask you to help. Because, the National Education Ministry decree with number 123 does not give any instructions on taking children to pick cotton. There is no instruction at all in general about the children's involvement in the cotton harvest. However, 7-8-9th grade children left to pick cotton from the 19th of September. So now I am being forced to fill the attendance books and write salary for the teachers in full, and it is all being done to make it look like children attended the lessons. But when I said I did not want to write it and do illegal work, I am being harassed. The head of the district branch of education together with the school director are forcing other teachers to sign a letter which says "sack Gaybullo Bektoshov". Because my only mistake is I refused to do their illegal assignment. There is no government office left I haven't complained, no one is bothered, says Gaybulla Bektoshov, the depute director of a school in Bukhara region's Oltoy district.

Source: Ozodlik, 19.10.2011

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24364810.html>

UZBEKISTAN

Forced Child Labour Kills

By Pavol Stracansky

BISHKEK, Oct 19, 2011 (IPS) - A 13-year-old boy has become the latest victim of state-sponsored forced child labour in Uzbekistan as its regime continues to ignore boycotts and international condemnation of its practices during the country's annual cotton harvest.

Bakhodir Pardaev, from Kashkadarya province in southern Uzbekistan, was left in a coma after suffering horrific injuries when he was run over by a car.

He and other schoolchildren had been returning from cotton fields where they had been sent by authorities to help with the harvest when he was hit.

Like many harvesters, he had been forced to walk a dangerous route to the fields and back home alongside highways.

Rights groups say that the accident is just one of many every year involving children forced into harvesting cotton.

Nadejda Atayeva, an activist working for the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia told IPS: "This is just one in a series of similar traffic accidents associated with the cotton harvest campaign and coercive mobilisation of school children every year.

"The country turns into a Stalinist labour camp every harvest. Millions of ordinary citizens and their children are turned into slaves of the ruling regime. There are accidents and food poisoning and diseases, but authorities stop information about them from getting out."

An estimated one million to 2.5 million children, some as young as 10, are forced to take part in the harvest by authorities every year.

Some are collectively bussed out from towns and villages and put in cramped and unsanitary temporary dormitories which local rights groups say are no more than labour camps.

Uzbekistan is one of the world's biggest cotton exporters, shipping out 850,000 tons per year. Its cotton industry is worth more than a billion dollars annually and its harvest is a matter of national economic priority.

But more than 90 percent of the harvest is carried out by hand, and state authorities organise the use of child labour en masse to ensure quotas are met

Schools, colleges, and universities are closed for months every cotton season under the approval of state education authorities.

Families who refuse to send their children to pick cotton are threatened with the loss of social benefits, gas, water and electricity supplies, and their children face exclusion from schools and colleges.

For more than a decade human rights groups have campaigned against the use of child labour in the harvest but President Islam Karimov's dictatorial regime has repeatedly reneged on promises to stamp out the practice.

Tashkent has signed up to international agreements outlawing child labour and has officially said that children have not taken part in the harvest since 2008.

But many groups claim they are still being forced to pick cotton. UNICEF representatives in Uzbekistan have told IPS that as many as one million children were mobilised to work in the last cotton harvest.

IPS has also been sent documents by the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights showing official press releases from provincial authorities sent out to local media and community leaders outlining the mass mobilisation of tens of thousands of college students and school children for this year's harvest.

Uzbekistan refuses to allow monitoring teams from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) into the country.

But the issue has come to the attention of major Western companies.

Last month global retailers such as Walmart, Walt Disney, H&M and Adidas announced they had joined a boycott on products using Uzbek cotton. More than 60 major international firms have now signed up to it.

Rights groups have welcomed the support but there is concern that on its own it will be largely ineffective and may not stop Uzbek cotton ending up on retailers' shelves. Global supply chains which see cotton often exported, processed and then re-exported, mean that the origins of cotton in textile products are often impossible to identify.

Industry experts also say that while western customers may be turning away, there are still plenty of buyers for Uzbek cotton.

The country's international cotton fair, which was held this month and brought in more than 500 million dollars in cotton deals, was attended by more than 300 companies from around the world – up on last year's number.

Tashkent has recently embarked on new trading partnerships with a number of other Asian countries, including Pakistan.

In a statement given to Russian media, a government trade official in Tashkent dismissed the boycott as "not something that Uzbekistan will suffer seriously from."

Rights groups say that international governments and institutions must put more pressure on Uzbekistan to observe international rights commitments.

But there have been ambiguous signals from both Brussels and Washington on relations with Uzbekistan recently.

Earlier this year there was outrage when President Karimov, whose regime has been accused of widespread barbaric human rights abuses, was welcomed in Brussels by European Commission president Jose Barroso.

It emerged soon after that the European Council, the EU's main decision-making body, had approved a trade protocol granting tariff and customs privileges and free access to European markets for Uzbek textiles.

The new agreement has yet to be voted on by the European Parliament and needs approval by, among others, its international trade committee which is set to decide on the matter next month.

Washington has also been criticised for its relationship with Tashkent. President Obama's administration is pushing for existing human rights-based restrictions on U.S. assistance, including military aid, to the Uzbek government to be lifted.

The U.S. is currently looking to cement cooperation with Uzbekistan on supply routes to troops in Afghanistan as alternative lines through Pakistan become more unstable.

Rights groups have called for the U.S. restrictions to be kept in place. Human Rights Watch (HRW) said in a statement sent to IPS that lifting them would be a "gift to one of the most repressive regimes in Central Asia."

Atayeva told IPS that Brussels must also send a clear signal to Tashkent over its cotton harvest by completely rejecting the trade protocol for its textiles.

"If this trade protocol is endorsed, textile and cotton from Uzbekistan will obtain tax and tariff preferences in Europe. This will encourage the ruling Uzbek regime to continue its policy of exploiting school children," she said.

Source: IPS News, 19.10.2011

<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=105514>

The District Attorney beat a representative of Mahalla for a lack of pickers in the cotton field.

In Tashkent region of Uzbekistan, a district attorney beat Zuhritdin Zakirov, an assistant chairman of Mahalla (quarter) committee in the village of "Ubayy Musaev" in Yangiyul area because he could not deliver the required number of cotton pickers to the cotton fields.

According to the plan of the local administration, from each Mahalla at least a hundred people should arrive to the cotton field every day. However, Zakirov could get no more than fifty people a day to go to the field:

"College students were working in the cotton field, about 130 in number. From Mahalla (district, community) I had 50 pickers"- told Zakirov to the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan. (HRAU)

According to HRAU, in late September, the attorney of Yangiyul District Ziyodullo Yuldashev came to the cotton fields, to test the area. He was indignant that Zakirov had failed to comply with the quota, and threateningly asked why he had not managed to bring in 100 cotton pickers.

"I told him that the rest are handicapped, someone feel bad and cannot collect, and the young are working. He started beating me. Hands beat, then kicked and insulted"- says Zuhritdin Zakirov.

Zakirov is 60 years old and has three daughters. The oldest one is a health worker. She was the one who provided him with the first aid so that Zakirov did not go to the hospital. The daughter took a photo of the bruising as evidence. Zakirov spent more than two weeks at home. He wrote a letter of complaint about the beating that he had experienced, then took it to the Mahalla committee, but according to him no one was there - all were working in the cotton fields.

A neighborhood committee chairman came to Zakirov and advised not to write any letters of complaints to avoid trouble. Later, even a local policeman visited him, who asked Zakirov to submit a resignation on his own, but Zakirov refused.

"They can not fire me, the Mahalla elects an elder (aksakal), and even a disclaimer from the post should be considered in the regional administration for two and a half years. But I do not have a desire to work that way. This Attorney is half as young as me and he dares to do this with me"- complains Zakirov.

Recall that the battle for the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan starts annually in September. Cotton harvest time normally lasts until November.

Source: FerganaNews, 24.10.2011

<http://www.fergananews.com/news.php?id=17505&mode=snews>

Uzbekistan fulfilled the cotton state plan.

According to official information, 3,5 million tons of cotton have been harvested in Uzbekistan. 90% of which is high quality cotton.

The statement of congratulations by the President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, has been broadcast.

Karimov congratulated cotton growers for their achieved victory and that profits from cotton will surpass 2 trillion 400 billion soms this year.

According to the president, this is 25% more than last year.

The main clients of Uzbek cotton are Bangladesh, China, Iran, Pakistan and Russia. The leading textile companies of the west boycotted Uzbek cotton for the use of child labour in cotton production.

Recently, Uzbekistan announced its plans to decrease the export of cotton raw material and slowly focus on processing the cotton inside the country. The Prime minister of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoev, stated that by 2015 up to 70% of the harvested cotton will be remanufactured locally.

Uzbekistan has inherited the tradition of administrative bureaucracy in farming and agriculture from soviet era- "to fulfil the cotton plan".

Despite the claims that writing up the amount of harvest in Uzbekistan during the Soviet era happened under the pressure of official Moscow, the content of the cotton policy was not changed even after the independence of Uzbekistan in 1991 say the observers.

Source: Ozodlik, 24.10.2011

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24369336.html>

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, 2011: <http://www.uzbekgermanforum.org>