

A CHRONICLE OF FORCED CHILD LABOUR: REPORTS FROM THE UZBEKISTAN COTTON HARVEST 2009

Week 1

Aggregated statistics of reports on forced child labor, cotton harvest 2009

Reports, at least, from the following regions of Uzbekistan suggest that school and college students are sent to pick cotton:

- 1) Tashkent Region
- 2) Syrdarya
- 3) Andijan
- 4) Bukhara
- 5) Djizak
- 6) Kashkadarya
- 7) Khoresm
- 8) Ferghana
- 9) Surkhandarya



There are 13 regions in Uzbekistan in total.

1. Andijan Region, September 17

From September 17, all students from schools in the Andijan region have been recruited to participate in the cotton harvest, Central Asian News reported, citing an unnamed official who spoke to Radio Ozodlik, the Uzbek language service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. College students had already begun picking cotton two days earlier, a source in the local education ministry confirmed. According to anonymous official sources, students in grades 8-11 throughout the region are now being sent to pick cotton. Due to weather conditions, the harvest is late in other regions, and thus child labour has not been as visible elsewhere.

In Andijan region, parents are also being instructed by the authorities to write and sign a formal statement of consent that their children will work “voluntarily” in the cotton fields “to help farmers and parents” pick cotton. Thus, the responsibility for the children’s safety and well-being is placed entirely on the parents. The government therefore not only secures a supply of child labour, but extricates itself from responsibility for all anticipated illnesses and injuries (and even deaths) which had been reported in large numbers in previous years.

Source: Radio Ozodlik/Central Asian News/ca-news.org/09/19/09.

Version: <http://ca-news.org/news/220861>; <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/1826701.html>

2. Surkhandarya Region, September 19

The Ezgulik human rights group reports that the schoolchildren are being mobilized to pick cotton in Surkhandarya region in southern Uzbekistan.

Source: Press-release of Ezgulik, Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, 09/19/09, No. 38 (distributed by email).

3. Khorezm region, September 22

According to the ferghana.ru website, all colleges in the Khorezm Region have been shut down and students are being mobilized for the cotton harvest. Buses packed with students and their bed wraps were escorted by the traffic police and first-aid services. The region has recently been affected by an epidemic of hemorrhagic fever.

Source: Ferghana.ru, 09/22/09

<http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=13035&mode=snews>

4. Djizak and Bukhara regions, September 23

Ninth-form schoolchildren, mainly from rural areas, and college students from the Djizak and Bukhara Regions have already been sent to the cotton fields to pick cotton.

Source: our own local correspondents.

5. Central government orchestrates the forced labour campaign

On September 22, Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyayev held a conference call (*selectornoye soveshanie*) with all regions of Uzbekistan in which local officials, offices of the prosecutor, police chiefs, and farmers were obliged to take part. The Prime Minister instructed local governors to arrange a so called “*khashar*,” which is a form of forced labour, the practice of which has been known since Soviet times.

The term “*khashar*” means voluntary, collective work done for the sake of the common good or to help out one’s neighbors, a practice that is in keeping with Uzbek tradition. However, the Uzbek regime exploits the concept to put a positive spin on its policy of forced labor, which contravenes international conventions to which it is a signatory, as well as its own constitution.

This year, the cotton harvest “*khashar*” is expected to last at least until October 12, but may be extended. In practical terms, this means that all schoolchildren, college students, and local civil servants are subject to ‘conscription.’

Such conference calls are being convened every 15 days by the Prime Minister, who has been charged with responsibility for Uzbekistan’s agricultural sector. During these conference calls, Mirziyayev instructs local governments and farmers when to begin certain agricultural tasks such as seeding, weeding, using pesticides and defoliants, harvesting, etc.. This year, he gave instructions to begin defoliation even though the cotton had not yet ripened and farmers were reluctant to waste expensive agro-chemicals. This style of governance suggests that little has changed since the times of the Soviet kolkhozes and sovkhoses.

Source: Uznews.net/09/24/09

Full version: http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=ru&sub=hot&cid=2&nid=11338.

6. Who benefit from the cotton export revenue

(i) According to Italy’s *Corriere dello Sport* newspaper, Luiz Felipe Scolari, the Brazilian coach of the Uzbek soccer club Bunyodkor, is receiving an annual salary of 13 million euro, ranking him the highest paid soccer coach in the world. In comparison, Inter Milan coach Jose Mourinho is paid 11 million euro a year. The Bunyodkor club is sponsored, evidently on the order from President milieu and family, by state-controlled oil, gas, cotton and textile manufacturing companies, among which is Zeromax GmbH.

Source: sports-planet.ru/09/08/09.

Full version: http://sports-planet.ru/index.php?option=com_weblinks&task=view&id=33809&Itemid=1

<http://www.corrieredellosport.it/Notizie/Calcio/80001/Mourinho%3F+No%2C+guadagna+di+pi%C3%B9+Scolari%3A+13+milioni!>

(ii) When the school year began on September 1, students found textbooks in short supply, reports ferghana.ru. According to teachers in Tashkent, the Ministry of Education has provided textbooks for only five of every 35-40 students, and parents are expected to find as well as pay for the rest. Due to the book shortage, school libraries are renting out textbooks for 6,000 Uzbek soums (about US \$3.00) for elementary school textbooks and 15,000 soums (\$10.00) for high-school texts [local salaries are not exceeding \$50/month – A.I.].

Students are also expected to donate literature to school libraries, which were emptied of Soviet-era literature some years ago. Since Uzbekistan's independence, Uzbek authorities removed not only Soviet authors, but other books that appeared to be Moscow-centric. District libraries have also been closed in Uzbekistan, replaced with poorly equipped "educational centers."

Although the Ministry of Education claimed that book fairs were opened in 754 schools, including in Karakalpakstan, Kashkadaryo and Samarkand regions, ferghana.ru reporters did not find a single book fair in Tashkent, Samarkand or Djizak regions, and local residents reported that textbooks were only available for rent at the school library. Students are taking turns using the scarce books.

Source: Ferghana.ru/09/01/09.

Full version: <http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=6285>

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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>

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