

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

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### **Uzbek cotton ban has limited reach**

With more than 60 of the world's biggest and best-known apparel companies and brands - including Adidas, Burberry, C&A, Levi Strauss, Li & Fung, Liz Claiborne, PVH Corp and Wal-Mart Stores - already boycotting cotton from Uzbekistan, it's not surprising there were no western buyers at the annual cotton fair in Tashkent earlier this month.

But does this really show the embargo, which has been gathering force since 2004, is working?

Not according to local media reports, which suggest all the cotton and textiles sold at the event will instead be heading to CIS countries, China, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Japan, UAE, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, South Korea and Singapore.

The Uzbek government also says there are no signs of a slowdown in the number of participants at the fair. From around 170 trading and textile companies at the first event in 2005, more than 660 representatives from 330 companies were attending this year.

The country is mired in controversy over the use of forced child labour in to pick the raw fibre. Each year, the Uzbekistan government is said to close schools and force more than 200,000 children into the cotton fields during the three-month long harvest.

But as the world's third largest exporter of cotton, is it really conceivable that its raw material won't make it into the supply chains of the companies banning its use? After all, the big purchasers of the fibre at this year's cotton fair were from the world's main garment producing countries.

In the same vein, cotton is an internationally traded commodity, raw cotton sources are not always easily identifiable, and cotton from different sources gets mixed up during the production process. Indeed, some estimates point out it can be very difficult to trace the origin of the fibres since more than 30% of the world's consumption of cotton fibre crosses international borders before processing. Monitoring is made even harder by the complicated and global reach of most garment supply chains.

Without systems in place to track and trace the origin of the cotton used in clothing and textiles, a commitment to ban the use of Uzbek cotton becomes virtually meaningless. It's a valiant gesture, but one that so far seems to have done little to persuade the Uzbek government to change its ways.

Source: just-style.com, 21.10.2011

[http://www.just-style.com/the-just-style-blog/uzbek-cotton-ban-has-limited-reach\\_id2023.aspx](http://www.just-style.com/the-just-style-blog/uzbek-cotton-ban-has-limited-reach_id2023.aspx)

### **Child labour is unacceptable, claim official leaflets posted in Angren**

Since the start of this year's cotton harvest, flyers have been posted around neighbourhoods in the city of Angren, which state that the use of forced child labour for agricultural work is not lawful.

The leaflets appear to contain a joint declaration by the Trades Union Council, the Commercial Farmers' Association and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security which was issued on 2nd June this year, and published on the Uzbek Foreign Ministry's Zhakhon news website. In other words, this is an official state document.

The joint declaration talks of the 'mendacious insinuations and misinformation' of various foreign media outlets regarding the widespread use of forced child labour in agricultural work. Individual paragraphs suggest that Uzbekistan's cotton is harvested exclusively by farmers.

The flyer states that children and high-school students are only allowed to work outside school hours and with the agreement of their parents. The text of the flyer emphasizes that “any attempts to force children to work, whether by threatening reprisals against the children themselves or their parents, will be dealt with in accordance with the laws of Uzbekistan”.

Human rights campaigners in Tashkent, meanwhile, say that the publicizing of the statement during the cotton harvest is no comfort to parents whose children are already in the cotton fields, or who are only permitted to avoid the harvest and continue their education if they pay.

A Cabinet of Ministers’ ruling has been in force for three years now and states that the use of forced child labour for agricultural work will not be tolerated. In full, the decree is entitled: ‘On measures to enact the conventions, ratified by the Republic of Uzbekistan, on the minimum working age and the convention to ban and eradicate the worst forms of child labour’ (Register of laws of the Republic of Uzbekistan’ 2008, No.39, article 377).

The degree, which has had full legislative status since 12 September 2009, releases all school children, college and high-school students from forced working, including agricultural work connected with cotton cultivation.

Unsurprisingly, three years after that ruling came into force, very few people in Uzbekistan appear to be aware of it.

Part 3 of the Cabinet of Ministers’ ruling envisages a widespread public information and media campaign to inform people of the legislation via employers and citizens’ organisations and by taking steps to ensure parents and farmers are aware of the law.

The ruling has been published on the Norma.uz website, but no other media channels have carried news of the legislation. Citizens’ organisations even claim never to have heard of the decree.

The decree, on photocopied sheets, is being circulated among parents and other interested parties. Parents will find it hard to understand that in the conditions, which currently exist in Uzbekistan, there could be a decree banning the exploitation of their children.

In Angren the result of this awareness campaign is that many parents can now invoke this legislation, having proof that it exists in their hands, confirming irrefutably that their children are free of their ‘cotton obligation’ and the ‘tax’ they were forced to pay in order to stay in their and avoid work in the fields. And these children will no longer be expelled from their schools.

If only it the joint statement of the Trades Union Council, the Commercial Farmers’ Association and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security had been published before 2nd June this year.

Source: uznews, 26.10.11

[http://www.uznews.net/news\\_single.php?lng=en&sub=top&cid=3&nid=18222](http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=en&sub=top&cid=3&nid=18222)

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## **Mayor beat college directors**

Turob Juraev, the mayor of Surkhandarya region, beat 8 college directors on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October during a meeting in the local administration office in Djarkhurghon district.

One of the more severely beaten individuals happened to be the director of the district's agriculture college. The mayor beat him until he bled from his nose and mouth.

An eyewitness of the incident, the head of one of the organisations in Djarkurghon district, told Radio Liberty the details of the beating:

Radio Liberty: Where did this meeting take place?

- In Djarkurghon district's mayor's office. He asks for cotton, daily target, he asks for daily normative plan. There is nothing left in the fields, where can he find it from? He says to bring even if it is 10 or 20 kilo.

Radio Liberty: Why did he beat the college director? Did he say anything or ask? Maybe he argued or said something true?

- He said to bring cotton. What could poor director say? He says there is no cotton left in the fields. Mayor demands from him to find.

Radio Liberty: Did you see yourself how he beat them?

- Yes, I was present at that meeting

Radio Liberty: Didn't the college directors and heads of companies say anything after the assaults?

- What can they do? No one can object.

Radio Liberty: Did he beat only this man or others also got beaten?

- Others were beaten too, sometimes he even kicks some of them.

The violent politics of local authorities in Uzbekistan has been continuing for several years now.

It has become a customary habit for local mayors, prosecutors and police to easily assault and use violence in meetings with farmers and heads of various institutions. And the victims of such politics built on administrative bureaucracy cannot complain to anybody about their ordeals, because prosecutors and police usually bear witness to these types of assaults.

Many other Radio Liberty listeners spoke a lot about the violence of Surkhondaryo region mayor Turob Juraev in the past.

Recently a 50-year-old farmer, Ismoil Ruranazarov, who lived in the Ziyodillo Kuldoshev neighbourhood of Muzrobot district, Surkhondaryo region, spent the night in police detention after he was told off by the mayor of the region on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September. He later on committed suicide by hanging himself.

Source: Ozodlik, 27.10.2011

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24373406.html>

## **The cotton plan was fulfilled but students and children are still in the fields**

Despite the cotton plan was fulfilled in Uzbekistan, schoolchildren and higher education students are still in the cotton fields.

It has been 6 days since the president of Uzbekistan congratulated the cotton growers of the country with the 3,5 million tons of cotton harvest. However, according to Radio Liberty sources, the cotton harvest has continued in the regions of the country.

One of the farmers from Djizzakh, who wanted to stay anonymous, says that the cotton plan has been fulfilled across the country, the labourers who are still in the fields are still not dismissed to go home.

“Children who came to pick cotton are still here and, they are here from morning till evening for non existing cotton. The bus stations are closed, markets are closed. Even the hospitals are closed, they say apparently everyone will be dismissed on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November. There is already nothing left to pick....“

A director of one of the Surkhondaryo region schools also wanted to stay anonymous for his safety reasons. This director confirmed that the children of his school were in cotton fields for the last two months and although they did not receive “official dismissal”, he independently took decision to return children to classes:

- Cotton harvest is not finished yet. We didn't receive any instructions to go home. But for two days we have lessons at school. I called them back. I don't know, I haven't told this to anyone yet. We are holding classes on our own.

The school director adds that there is a risk to be punished for returning children to school without instructions, but he still took the responsibility on himself to do so.

- I'll be told off, but even so, hoping that there are only 3-4 days left, we started the lessons. This year even the 5<sup>th</sup> grades had to go to pick cotton. Up to this day each schoolchild is assigned to pick 5 kilo a day. They all bring 5-10 kilo cotton,- says a director of a school.

A doctor of medical clinics *Guliston* in Samarkand region's Kattakorgan district Abdurayim Bozorov also says that schoolchildren and teachers are still in cotton fields:

- They are saying that higher grade schoolchildren will return to classes, but the helpers haven't come back from the fields yet. The schools are occupied by those labourers who turned the school space into accommodation. As you know, there weren't any orders to return children back to school. Instead, all the teachers were taken to the fields as well, - says Abdurayim Bozorov.

According to Jahongir, the student of Djizzakh state institute of pedagogy, students who escaped from the cotton fields are being threatened with dismissal from university:

- Some say that students will stay in the fields till the 1<sup>st</sup> of November, others say till the 5<sup>th</sup>. They are saying: "stay here, do not leave, if you leave, you will have problems". Now it is not that strict. We get up at 7:00 in the morning and go to field at 8-8:30. We pick cotton till 1- 1:30 pm and go back for lunch, after the lunch break we go again to pick cotton,- says Jahongir.

Source: Ozodlik, 27.10.2011

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24373169.html>

## **Mass participation in the cotton harvest beats all records**

Cotton farmers say that this year's cotton harvesting campaign in Uzbekistan, has broken last year's record for the numbers of people mobilized en masse to work in the cotton fields.

Students and schoolchildren, teachers and doctors, engineers and community workers, from lowest to highest ranking, have been out in the fields this autumn harvesting cotton.

Even the Minister of Culture and Sport, Tursunali Kuziev, volunteered for the harvest, together with his colleagues, according to sources close to the Ministry. The source said that Kuziev worked diligently to set a good example to his colleagues.

"This is the first, and perhaps, the last official of such high rank who has not considered it beneath him to take part personally in this nationwide work," said a surprised colleague of the Minister.

Perhaps the most striking change for this year's harvest is the fact that people convicted of minor offences were also drafted into the fields.

Huge numbers of prisoners work on the cotton plantations situated close to their prison colonies. It is often said that prisoners make the most disciplined cotton harvesters. Whereas ordinary people face only the possibility of losing their job if they fail to fulfil the production target, convicts can be charged with breaking the rules of their detention and can have their sentences prolonged.

In Buston, Tashkent region, cotton farmers have been forced to live and work for weeks in conditions which threaten their health, eating only thin soup and bread. When daily quotas are not met, workers have the cost of this food taken out of their already miserly pay.

Tanks supplying drinking water for local residents only work for an hour or two a day, so for visiting workers, there is barely enough left to fill a flask, even if they could stop work in order to do so.

Doctors at the Buka hospital in Tashkent region say the wards are full of patients suffering from cold-related illnesses, allergies and inflamed appendices (students especially), although doctors are refusing to give sick notes to allergy sufferers to enable them to stop work, because they are concerned about losing their jobs.

"It would be bearable," says an exhausted cotton farmer from Karakuyli village of, "if you could come home late at night after your day's labour, and cook your supper or have a bath, but you can't do either of those because there is no gas and no water."

Source: Uznews, 30.10.2011

[http://www.uznews.net/news\\_single.php?lng=en&sub=hot&cid=4&nid=18258](http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=en&sub=hot&cid=4&nid=18258)

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