

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

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With this issue, we conclude our chronicle of forced child labour in Uzbekistan in 2011.

The chronicles of events taking place in September and October of 2011, draw a thorough picture of the exploitation of the Uzbek people during the cotton season in the country.

This year students and schoolchildren worked in the fields for about one and a half months. They received 3-4 US dollar cents per kilo of cotton picked. The money earned by picking cotton was not even enough to cover the food they ate during

the harvest period.

Uzbekistan remains the only country in the world, where the state closes universities, colleges and schools all across the country and sends children for forced labour in the cotton fields.

In order to hide information about the mass and systematic human rights violations, the Uzbek government persecutes local human rights activists, opens criminal cases against journalists, closes international organisations and refuses to grant entrance visas to western journalists wanting to visit the country.

Since 2009, the Uzbek government does not permit the ILO mission to visit the country to conduct an independent investigation during the cotton season.

The cotton harvest has been extended for another ten days.

Teachers and schoolchildren who spent two months in the fields returned and when they were finally about to start their classes, the district mayor ordered them all to go back to cotton fields.

In both Ishtihon district and Samarkand region, the national cotton plan was only officially fulfilled on paper. But instead of calling farmers, Shukhrat Ne'matov, mayor of Ishtihon district, called directors of colleges, lyceums and schools. He ordered them not to start classes, but to go back and pick more cotton in the fields. A teacher who works in one of the schools in Ishtihon district called and reported to Radio Liberty:

- Directors are abused and get shouted at by local mayors. They tell them to find cotton from wherever possible. At the moment, all children from the 1st grade to the 9th are at home, when classes were about to start, they are being re-sent to pick cotton. We were given a timetable. They say 10 more days of cotton for us, till the 10th of November, said this teacher, who was afraid of saying his name.

According to the caller, school directors are being threatened by local mayors to be dismissed from their posts if they don't do what they are ordered. And in their turns, directors pressure teachers and children to go to fields and find cotton:

- Directors come to school. We have meetings in the mornings. There are no classes at school now. And they start discussing the cotton topic: "find it wherever you can. I have an order to bring cotton. Find it", he says. Then teachers say the same thing to children:" they are forcing us, telling us to go and find cotton" and then children go and find few kilos of cotton and bring it to school. They bring cotton together with their school bags.

At the moment we have around 300 students. They bring 150-200 kilos of cotton a day. Some children pick, some others don't.

Radio Liberty contacted the Ishtihon district mayor's office to get their comments. But Sukhrat Nematov, the district mayor could not be found.

Source: Ozodlik, 04.11.2011
<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24381666.html>

Bakhodir, the victim of the 2011 cotton campaign, still has not gained back his speech.

Bakhodir, the 13 year old the pupil of School #24 in Chiroqchi district of Kaskadarya region who fell into a coma after the car accident he had while returning from the cotton field, still has not gained back his speech. He has been sent home by doctors despite his unimproved health.

Currently, Bakhodir is at home. His father, Adham Pardaev, told Radio Liberty Bakhodir can neither speak nor walk.

- Bakhodir has not spoken yet. We brought him home from hospital. Doctors said that he should go home and have a rest. If he sees his siblings, he will start talking. I do not understand anything about coma. But he can't stand on his feet, his leg and arm on one side are not working. We feed him with a spoon. He can only gesture, - said Adham Pardaev.

According to the police office of Chiroqchi district in Kashkadarya region, a criminal case was opened on Bakhodir Pardaev's accident.

A member of staff from the local police office, told Radio Liberty, he can not give any information about the case because investigations are still in progress.

According to Adham Pardaev, since his son's accident, the police officers have only come by once to meet with them.

- The other day the investigator came. He came and said that the driver who hit my son claimed he was innocent and that my son came and ran against his car. The investigator said "now we have to open an investigation, will you reconcile with him or not?" I said: "I haven't even seen the driver who hit my Bakhodir, how can I reconcile with a man whom I haven't even met? If he is a human, he should come to me." – said Adham Pardaev.

The "Ezgulik" society has been studying the case of 10 year old Ahrorjon Abdumannonov from Namangan who became a victim of last year's cotton season.

Ahrorjon Abdumannonov who was the pupil of Pop district of Namangan region in school #25 had a fatal road accident while he was returning from cotton.

"Ezgulik" society took the school #25 in Pop district to court for the death of Ahrorjon Abdumannonov.

Source: Ozodlik, 10.11.2011
<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24387149.html>

A teacher has been punished for not committing a crime.

The deputy director of school #4 in Olot district has received an official warning for not registering the missed classes by schoolchildren who were sent to pick cotton during the harvest season.

He received a warning because he did not want to fulfill the illegal assignments by the school director and the head of the national education department:

- Look, all the children left for the cotton harvest from the 19th of September without any order, or official decree. And they only returned to class on the 17th of October. The head of the national education department wanted to force me to register their attendance during all this time, and to write pay slips for teachers. When I said that I would not do any illegal activity like that, he sent me an official warning by post, which read: "did not fulfill his duties", - says Gaybulla Bektoshev, the deputy director of the above mentioned school.

According to the deputy director, the requirement of registering class attendance without it haven taken place, came from the school director and the head of the national education department. But Gaybulla Bektoshev demanded to provide with documents:

- I said to give me an order about sending teachers to pick cotton, which would say that teachers are indeed in the fields and they should be paid for the work they do in the cotton fields from the state budget and that they can teach the missed classes whenever possible and get paid for them too. Even then they forced us to fill the registration books, it is the same situation everywhere. Teachers get their salaries for the full hours of work. But we are deceiving the children. In my school alone a total of 1780 hours of class have been missed, it is nothing but deceit,- says Gaybulla Bektoshev.

He adds that he's been fighting against this unwritten rule, which has become something of a tradition in the Uzbek national education system.

Gaybullo Bektoshev wrote complaint letters about the illegal demands of filling attendance books and timesheets for teachers and classes which did not take place, to the regional department of national education, the state ministry of national education and to the prosecutor's office. But each time the complaint letters were returned to the district department of national education to be dealt with there.

The problem Gaybullo Bektoshev raised is not just specific to Olot district schools, but it is widespread across all the areas where cotton is grown.

Ziyodullo Razzokov, the teacher of school #1 in Zarbdor district of Djizzakh region says that it is a "disease" left from the post soviet times:

- It does not matter where we are, in the cotton field or somewhere else, if we have lessons given to us, we have to fill the attendance books whether we conduct the classes or not. The state pays us salaries for this work. It is a straightforward crime, but we have to close our eyes to that,- says Ziyodillo Razzokov.

One of the directors of schools in Surkhandarya region, who wanted to stay anonymous says that "they are embarrassed to look in the eye of the children for the lies they tell".

They tell us to fill the registration books, and make us write that the class has taken place. A teacher is a liar in front of a child's eyes. And we have to grade them at our own risk. Sometimes I even regret that I have become a teacher. It is hard to look the children in the eye,- says the director.

Source: Ozodlik, 16.11.11

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24392598.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>