Leading up to the start of the 2014 cotton harvest next month, the government of Uzbekistan has begun preparations for the mass, coercive mobilization of the population to the cotton fields.

The Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights (UGF) monitors in Uzbekistan report that all signs indicate the government will once again this year use the forced labour of ordinary people that have nothing to do with agriculture.

Over the last two harvests, the Uzbek authorities have seemingly tried to reduce the number of children forced to pick cotton by forcing increased numbers of adults to harvest the state’s strategic crop. Furthermore, in the recent harvests the authorities have continued to systematically mobilize college-age children, ages 16-17.

This summer, colleges -- the equivalent of high schools in many Western school systems—have required parents to sign a contract that includes an agreement that their children will conduct agricultural work during the school year, as a condition for enrolment.

Local authorities have ordered the heads of public-sector institutions to organize schedules dictating when their employees will work shifts picking cotton.

Secondary schools ordered their teachers to visit the homes in their communities and make a list of the people receiving social welfare benefits from the state. School teachers are also obliged to encourage public participation in the cotton harvest.

Forced labour in Uzbekistan is not confined to the mobilized population for the cotton harvest. Tens of thousands of farmers are also victims of the current system and forced to execute the state imposed plan for cotton and wheat production. Under the current system, farmers are often driven into massive debts to the state. The state’s use of land leases contractually obliges farmers to meet annual quotas for cotton and wheat; local authorities control input suppliers; and the state’s control over buying and selling the commodities facilitates below production-cost purchasing prices and high, global-market sales prices.
In April 2014 the government of Uzbekistan signed a framework agreement, the Decent Work Country Programme, with the International Labour Organization for a three-year technical assistance program aimed to apply international labour conventions. Under the Programme, the ILO aims to support the implementation of the National Plan of Action for the Elimination of Child Labour and the improvement conditions of work and employment in agriculture, including “eradicating forced labour in the cotton industry.”

Uzbek citizens have yet to learn about the government’s initiative to respect their rights, yet the Uzbek official press has reported actions underway. The official website UZINFORM reported that the authorities conducted seminars on compliance with international labour standards. On August 9, UZINFORM reported, a similar workshop was held at the Regional Council of Trade Unions of Namangan region.

"During the seminar, a video was shown about the history of the International Labour Organization and its activities, which is based on the following principles: labour - not a commodity; freedom of speech and freedom of association are essential to sustained progress; poverty anywhere is a threat to public welfare; all people regardless of race, creed or sex, have the right to material well-being and spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity.” (http://www.uzinform.com/ru/news/20140809/21450.html)

While Uzbek officials participate in the seminars, they have not found the political will to organize the cotton harvest without the forced labour of ordinary citizens.

Uncensored media reports:

The mobilization of people to pick cotton in Uzbekistan is underway
08.08.2014

The hokims (head of government) in Tashkent region ordered the directors of schools and colleges to put together lists of people who will be sent to the cotton harvest, report teachers in the cities of Akhangaran, Olmaliq and Angren. In addition, the hokims ordered schoolteachers to go from house to house to identify and list people suitable for the cotton harvest.

„We are already organized into the first and second shifts of teachers to be sent to pick cotton. And now our director has told all teachers to make a list of people in their mahallas (community organizations) who can work in the cotton harvest. We need to go home and make photocopies of passports of people to send to the cotton. Right now I’m back, after having made the list, - said the teacher.” - Teacher of a school in the city Akhangaran.

According to the Akhangaran school teacher, 80% of the population of his community is unemployed.

"So, the focus is on pensioners and people receiving benefits. We tell them to go and pick cotton, or hire someone in their place. Since they are afraid of losing benefits, they are forced to comply,” the teacher says.

An official from the Akhangaran khokimiyat also said that preparations for the cotton harvest are underway.

„Preparations are in full swing. The hokim has initiated preparations to mobilize the population for the cotton harvest. Makhallas compiled lists of people suitable for the cotton harvest. Teachers and nurses will take turns picking cotton. Everything will be fine!” The official said.

Source: Radio Ozodlik
http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/26520684.html

Fergana Valley teachers prepare for the cotton harvest
12.08.2014
In Fergana valley, authorities have ordered teachers currently on sick leave to quickly return to health, and those refusing to sign up for cotton shifts to resign. The 2014 cotton harvest promises to be a harsh one.

The Board of Education in Fergana Valley is busy compiling lists of names and obtaining passport copies so it can identify which teachers to send to the cotton harvest in early September.

This year’s harvest campaign looks to be even more brutal and unjust than last year.

“Sick teachers have been told to get better immediately. Those who refuse to go are being told to resign by September 1,” says elementary school teacher Salima.

Math teacher Marhabo adds, “A group of us has just returned from weeding cotton. We had to spend our own money. Farmers did not even offer us water. And we worked in 40-degree heat.”

Teachers and medics have already been sent to the fields, since August 11.

After the widespread use of child labor was banned last year, the government has been filling the void by forcing an increasing number of public sector employees to work in cotton production. Teachers and professors as well as doctors and medical personnel make up the largest groups of public sector employees, and they get the brunt of forced labor within the country.

“My school has 500 students, and during the harvest we have only about 3-5 elderly or sick teachers left behind,” says English teacher Hafiza. As a result students either skip school or are sent home.

“If eighth and ninth graders were working as well, we would not be so pressured. Every September I dread the upcoming three months and am afraid that I won’t be able to make it,” she continues in desperation.

Source: UzNews

Teachers in Uzbekistan preparing for cotton harvest
07.08.2014

Angren’s City Board of Education is gearing up for the upcoming cotton harvest. Every educational institution in Tashkent province, including kindergartens, has been required to submit a list of employees selected to participate in picking cotton. It is expected that the work will start around September 5 and last at least two months. The work will be done in three shifts of twenty days each.

According to unconfirmed reports, the number of employees required to participate in cotton picking is set to increase this year: from 30 percent of all staff to 40 percent.

Educators explain this increase as government’s attempt to compensate for the void left after the largely – or allegedly – discontinued use of labor by school children.

Source: UzNews

“Little Thorn” in Jizzakh province protests against growing cotton
01.08.2014

The head of the Jizzakh province’s livestock farm, appropriately called “Little Thorn”, has submitted an official protest to the authorities to complain about being forced to grow cotton.

Gulchehka Turaeva opposed the decision by local authorities to force her to change from cattle raising to cotton growing.
Turaeva has been raising cattle on her 47 hectares for the past few years. She supplies meat and dairy products to kindergartens in her region.

Turaeva secured a meeting with the Jizzakh province’s khokim Sajfidin Ismailov and tried to convince the administrator that raising cattle is an important sector for the economy and that farmers should not be treated as slaves but rather allowed to pursue their chosen professions to the best of their abilities.

Turaeva characterized the meeting as “successful”.

After that her district khokim, Jergash Gajbullaev, decided to intervene. During an audit by the province’s administrators Gajbullaev and a group of hand-selected farmers viciously reprimanded Turaeva, swearing and insulting her and make her out to look like a troublemaker who is seeking conflict.

The unyielding farmer submitted a complaint against the Zarbadsky district khokim to her local police and prosecutor general.

The fate of her farm remains unclear at this time.

Source: UzNews

In Uzbekistan, a farmer burned a tractor in protest
12.07.2014

On July 11, 44-year-old Bakhtiyor Ruzimetov, a farmer from the village of Ovshar, Khazarasp district, Khorezm region, set fire to a "Magnum" tractor, belonging to the district tractor fleet (ICC). According to witnesses, the district hokim wanted to destroy ripe sunflower crop on the farmer's fields, since he had not fulfilled the state-imposed quota for wheat.

According to a Radio Ozodlik source in Ovshar village, Bakhtiyor could no longer tolerate the oppression from the hokim, and so he decided to protest the matter.

"Bakhtiyor is one of the younger farmers in the region. Due to the fact that he failed to fulfil the plan for grain, the hokim sent a tractor to the farmer's land to destroy the ripening sunflower crop. So in protest of this action, Bakhtiyor set fire to the tractor," said a resident of Ovshar village.

The chairman of the mahalla (neighbourhood committee) of the village, Razhabboy Iskandarov, confirmed the story to "Ozodlik".

According to the police officer in Khazarasp district, who asked not to be named, Bakhtiyor Ruzimetov is now arrested, and a criminal case has been opened against him.

In recent years, cases of ruthless destruction of crops cultivated by farmers and the general population by the local authorities have been observed quite often.

For example, on April 17 this year, potatoes, wheat and other crops in areas belonging to thousands of farms and villages in the Davlatbi Kukcha Alat district of Bukhara region were completely destroyed in a single day.

Source: Radio Ozodlik
http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/25454714.html