

COTTON 2014: A CHRONICLE OF FORCED LABOUR OF CHILDREN AND ADULTS

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The Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights monitors the use of forced labor during the cotton harvest in six regions of Uzbekistan. We offer you the 3rd issue of Chronicles.

Summary: Under the pretext of the short window of dry weather for cotton harvest and ending the use of child labor, the Uzbek government has coercively mobilized the adult population en masse to pick cotton.

Reports from the field:

Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, Nukus: September 9, students and teachers from Nukussskogo State University and the Pedagogical Institute have been sent to the cotton fields. In the city, bolshistvo buses and minibuses have been mobilized to carry cotton pickers to the fields leading to a disruption in the public transport system of the city. Conductors of private minibuses complain that they are not paid for transporting harvesters to cotton fields tens of kilometers outside of Nukus.

Tashkent region, Akhangaran: September 8, a convoy of around thirty buses and minibuses took the first shifts of cotton growers, accompanied by police. The groups sent to pick cotton included health-care workers, teachers and private-sector industrial workers. These groups followed the previously mobilized residents of cities located nearer the cotton fields. As in previous years, the transportation of citizens forced to pick cotton in full-size and mini-buses resulted in fewer buses available in the cities, and therefore difficulties for citizens seeking urban and intercity transportation.

Bukhara: September 8, third-year students from several colleges were sent to pick cotton,, accompanied by their teachers. [Colleges and lyceums in Uzbekistan are the equivalent of high schools in the American education system; third-year students are typically age 18.] Daily cotton picking quotas for the students is 50 kilograms. Professors reported that the college directors informed them that if the third-year students cannot fulfill the daily quotas, then they will need to mobilize second-year students [typically age 17].

Syrdarya region: Local authorities ordered college directors to mobilize third-year students to pick cotton. Approximately 20% of colleges staff are also ordered to send their students and teachers to pick cotton. Authorities also informed teachers even with the young children, will be sent to work in the fields for 2 to 3 weeks. Authorities also ordered neighborhood committees ("mahalla committees") to mobilize people receiving social-welfare assistance.

Music teacher teaches mathematics in Uzbekistan

08.09.2014

The mobilization of the population of Uzbekistan for the cotton harvest is gaining momentum. School teachers from Khorezm have been sent to pick cotton, reports Radio "Ozodlik" (Freedom).

A teacher of the school district Honka in Khorezm region reported that the school was left to a few number of teachers who have to teach subjects for which they are not experts.

Here is the letter from the teacher:

"We are forced to pick cotton. During the season, the cotton harvest in schools is a matter of the number of teachers. True, students are now not sent to the harvest. However, if the school does not have teachers, then who is there to teach? What is the use? Language arts, mathematics and other core subjects are taught by music teachers.

Each class is given one teacher who spends 6 hours with the students. This teacher is required to teach all the subjects.

And we have eight primary classes. Four classes study in the morning shift, and –four in the afternoon. Teachers are forced to teach in the morning and the second shift.

It is not possible to hire someone to pick cotton for you. You need to go to the field with your passport. They won't even provide for transportation to take teachers to and from the fields. We have to pay from our own pockets for transportation to the field.

In previous years, they said that for every 10 kilograms of cotton you would receive one kilogram of grain, and for a certain amount more, oil. But neither grain nor oil, nor anything at all have we seen."

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/26572283.html>

In Khorezm all medical staff sent en mass to the cotton harvest

07.09.2014

Doctors and nurses in rural medical centers, regional hospitals and clinics in Khorezm region were mobilized to pick cotton. Patients arriving to the hospital, where there were few doctors remaining, have been forced to return home without treatment. The patients did not find doctors on site, reports Radio "Ozodlik."

In all areas of Khorezm a general mobilization to pick cotton has begun. Workers of institutions funded by the state have been forcibly mobilized to the cotton harvest.

An "Ozodlik" correspondent called the nurse working in one of the medical centers of village Khazarasp district. She was in a cotton field. According to her, all the doctors and nurses of village health units were sent to pick cotton.

"Today we should have a day off. But everyone was forcibly sent to pick cotton. It is said that we have two months to pick the cotton. Today the set quota was 50 kilograms. It's now 4 pm, and I could hardly collected only 30 kilograms," - said the nurse.

The interviewee said rural medical stations only had one doctor and one nurse on duty.

"Here we are two doctors and 13 nurses. And now there is only one doctor and one nurse. All the others were sent to pick cotton. If someone tries to refuse to go to pick cotton, then they threaten to cut 30 percent of the salary," - said a nurse from Khazarasp.

A resident of the district Shovot, Ollobergan said yesterday he brought a patient to the district hospital but did not find doctors.

"Yesterday I brought my baby grandson to the hospital in the Shovot district center. All the doors were closed, and a poster read, "All at the cotton harvest."

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/26571023.html>

Mobilization of private businesses to the harvest

07.09.2014

One of the businessmen working in the construction market in Bektemir district of Tashkent city said in an interview with "Ozodlik" that the deputy governor visited the market area and said that from every point of sale one person should go to the harvest. For all those who didn't want to go to the field, it is necessary to pay 800 soms per person, according to "Ozodlik".

"He arrived September 6 at 11 am and gathered together all the merchants in one place and held a meeting. The deputy district governor was with other officials. Since I was late, I cannot name them all. They said, 'September 5, the cotton harvesting season begins. Starting next week, we have to send people from Bektemir district. Whoever cannot go will have to pay 800 thousand sum each. With this money we would hire people to pick cotton,'" - said one of the shop owners.

According to him, the meeting was attended by 70-90 merchants. The deputy district governor demanded that the money be collected the following week.

None of the participants of the meeting expressed a complaint about the demand to pass 800 thousand sum for not going to the cotton harvest.

Our interlocutor explained as follows:

"You know, all market shops are rented, so you can be kicked out from the market at any time or they will send the tax authorities. Therefore, we are forced to listen to them and be silent. There is no other way," - said the businessman.

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/26570666.html>

Uzbek Prime Minister strictly ordered not to attract minors to pick cotton

5.09.2014

September 5, Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyev held a meeting in the Kashkadarya Regional hokimiyat, during which he ordered the country not to involve minors in this season's cotton harvest." At the same time, the Prime Minister ordered the mobilization of university students, as well as officers and employees of all state and public institutions, to the harvest.

A student of a vocational college Jizzakh region called Radio "Ozodlik" on September 5th and said that students have been required to sign forms with statements such as "will not come close to the cotton field."

"We have all been forced to write a letter of guarantee: "This year I did not go to the cotton field, will not leave school, but if I go to the field, I agree to incur administrative punishment." And our parents forbade us to go to the field to help after school. If we go to help parents pick cotton, then they, too, will be punished. The main thing this year is to – study" - said the 16-year-old college student.

In the same way, Radio "Ozodlik" has been told that warnings have been issued to farmers of the "bad" effects of attracting young children to pick cotton.

Over the years, the government of Uzbekistan has forced more than 2 million young children to pick cotton for months and has subjected to during severe international criticism and a boycott. They found a way to solve this problem in 2013.

According to reports continuously flowing into Radio "Ozodlik," now students and teachers of all universities in the country, as well as public-sector organizations and institutions, those funded from the state budget, have been ordered to pick cotton starting 10 September.

This general mobilization, according to "Ozodlik" sources, is being carried out according to an oral order from the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan.

"Those who do not want to go to pick cotton are immediately told to write a letter and leave, because if you do not want to work, you are asking a lot. They do not show us the legal basis for the decree, that we must go to the cotton harvest," said Dr. Arnaz, a doctor at the General Hospital & Medical Academy of Tashkent, in an interview with "Ozodlik," who was ordered to go to pick cotton starting September 15,

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/26568630.html>

Doctors and medical students are sent to the first Uzbek cotton harvest

4.09.2014

"These days all over Uzbekistan university students sign letters of guarantee that if they do not go pick cotton, then they agree to be expelled from school. "

Students at Bukhara State Medical Institute sent Radio "Ozodlik" a copy of the letter under which they are forced to sign.

In this letter, a student who wants to become a doctor swears: "Cotton - the wealth of our country, of our nation. And if I'm not going to collect it, then I agree to be expelled from the school. "

Such letters of guarantee were introduced in universities and secondary specialized educational institutions since last year. Here is what one of the students who signed the letter said:

"I signed yesterday. I will participate fully in the cotton harvest, I will pick the quota. If I break the obligation, then I agree to any measures taken against me. That's the kind of content we wrote at the dictation of the dean." – said the student, asking not to be named.

The Vice President for Academic Affairs at Bukhara State Medical Institute, appointed this year Chief of Staff of the cotton harvest, when asked to give an explanation for the letter of guarantee, he immediately hung up the phone, referring to employment.

Cardiologists, surgeons - all on the field!

A doctor at a hospital in the city of Tashkent reported September 4 to Radio "Ozodlik" that hospital employees, regardless of their age, were given an order to prepare to leave for the cotton fields starting September 15.

"At the end of August they put together special lists of when and who will go to pick cotton. If I am not mistaken, the lists were sent to the Ministry. Our main doctor went in and prepared a place at Arnaz. This is the third year we have been sent to pick cotton. Last year we paid day laborers 350 thousand som (\$ 110) to pick cotton in our place for 10 days. This year, this is not allowed, so we have to go ourselves as salaried workers, to fulfill the norm of the cotton harvest. Our quota is 80 pounds a day. No matter whether it is qualified physician, or academician professor – we all must go. We are told that "who wouldn't want to take his place, there are many who want to get a job very much," - said the doctor, who studied for 10 years to become a doctor.

According to him, the health professionals are going to Arnaz for 10 days to do hard physical labor, and still have to pay out of pocket 10-20 som for food.

"I myself am getting only 300 som. Traveling to the cotton fields is its own expense, to pick cotton for free, and we still have to make contributions to other cotton farmers. Cotton business is booming! So too doctors have been charged with cleaning the hospital grounds, planting trees and shrubs. We have become free labor for the Hokimiyat," – the Tashkent doctor said in an interview with "Ozodlik."

The Assistant to the Minister of Health of Uzbekistan in an interview with "Ozodlik" denied all the statements of the doctors and students.

"There is no order that the doctors and medical students of educational institutions go to pick cotton. That's not true. You know, the task of the doctor - to treat patients, and not to pick cotton. Ministry of Health gave no orders on the mobilization of physicians, and educational institutions did not give orders to medical students, "said an official of the Ministry of Health.

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/26566863.html>

Majority of teachers at Kokand school sent to pick cotton

11.09.14

The cotton harvest has started in Uzbekistan and at least one of the schools in Kokand is losing most of its teachers (40 out of 75). Those left behind are supposed to cover for their colleagues' classes while their colleagues are in the fields picking cotton.

Makhlie, one of the teachers going to pick cotton, told Uznews.net that she sometimes wonders if she is a professional teacher or a professional farmer.

She has worked at the same school for 15 years and has been sent to pick cotton each year. She spends three months out of the year in cotton production – either weeding or harvesting.

Makhlie and her colleagues will start their cotton work next week; 20 will live on a cotton farm and the other 25 will commute daily, a cost that teachers must cover at their own expense.

The remaining teachers must take over their colleagues' classes.

She herself has a choice of hiring a replacement laborer to do the work for her, but that would cost 12 thousand soms per day (4 USD), which is too expensive given her monthly salary of 500 thousand soms (166 USD).

<http://www.uznews.net/en/economy/27572-most-teachers-at-kokand-school-sent-to-pick-cotton>

Uzbek students mobilized for cotton work

10.09.14 21:24

All educational institutions in Uzbekistan have received a “cotton mobilization” directive from the government.

As a rule students in Tashkent – with the exception of students from the State University for Agriculture and Institute for Irrigation and Soil Reclamation – are usually excused cotton picking.

“It was unclear until the very last minute if third-year students would be going this year,” says Majmura, a music teacher in Qashqadaryo province. “But on September 8 we received an order that they are to be sent to the fields.”

First and second-year college students are not being forced to work this year as they are younger than 18.

This year the government has decided that the cotton harvest should be completed in the record time of one month.

<http://www.uznews.net/en/human-rights/27551-uzbek-students-mobilized-for-cotton-work>

Public employees in Karakalpakstan ordered to the cotton fields

03.09.14

Karakalpakstan public sector employees are set to start their mandatory cotton work on September 5.

Employees of the National Bank of Uzbekistan told Uznews.net that they would be sent to the cotton fields for periods of 20 days at a time.

Payment for their labor – 200 soms for a kilo of picked cotton – will be withheld in order to cover the costs of their lunches. They get tea and bread for breakfast and dinner.

Should cotton pickers wish to use electricity in their living quarters, they must pay a fee. Clean drinking water and showers are not provided.

Local residents themselves use firewood to prepare their food and use water from nearby rivers and lakes for cooking and irrigation – just as they did hundreds of years ago.

Hiring a replacement

Many public sector employees hire someone to take over their cotton duties. A replacement for one day costs about 20 thousand soms (7 USD).

For example, the entire staff of the National Drug Dependency Clinic chose to pay for replacement workers. Each employee paid 400 thousand soms (135 USD) to be exempted from 20 days of fieldwork. The doctors involved say that it is preferable to pay and have a chance to stay at home with their families and to see urgent patients at home than to toil in the fields.

Many of the employees of the National Bank of Uzbekistan also plan to hire workers to take over their cotton responsibilities. The bankers, however, say that they may be able to find replacements who are willing to work for even less than 20 thousand soms per day. They recall that last year there were seasonal workers offering their services for as low as 5-6 thousand soms per day.

<http://www.uznews.net/en/economy/27457-public-employees-in-karakalpakstan-ordered-to-the-cotton-fields>

III. Reports from Uzbek citizens emailed to UGF

10.09.2014

„ I am a student of the Tashkent Institute of Road (TARI). A couple of days ago, we were all gathered in the hall, and they began to tell us that 17th of September we will be sent to the cotton harvest in the region. They said no reference for an exemption is valid, and those who provide them will be automatically sent to a sabbatical ... Also, those who do not go for cotton will be sent on a sabbatical year. The man giving the orders had in his hands some kind of paper, allegedly an order from the Prime Minister, that that 5,000 students in Tashkent should go to pick cotton, by force, and whoever disobeys - expulsion, without recovery. Also recently I learned that exemptions from cotton picking can be bought by paying 1 million som (about \$ 300).

What to do?“