

A CHRONICLE OF FORCED LABOUR IN THE COTTON SECTOR IN UZBEKISTAN

Issue 5, October 6, 2014



Tashkent region college teachers, 04.10.2014

I. MONITORING REPORTS

The following are excerpts of interviews conducted by monitors of the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights (UGF) with Uzbek citizens in the cotton fields:

Dekhkonobod, a hospital worker picking cotton in Nishon district, Kashkadarya region, 27.09.2014:

“Our head doctor is saying that if we don’t go to pick cotton we will be fired, so we have to. I’m a paramedic, I have to help patients. But at the moment eighty percent of the personnel of the hospital I work for are here picking cotton. The conditions are poor. Seventy people were stuffed into one tent.”

Gulistan State University student, Syrdarya region, 26.09.2014:

“This year I was fortunate to become a student. I’m 19 years old. I finished college and entered University. We didn’t even have enough time to meet and get acquainted when the cotton harvest started. Everyone said that I would be separated from my class mates if I didn’t go pick cotton and that I can’t make friends after they come back from cotton, so I was curious and went. I’ve been living in a cotton dorm since September 11. On the second day of harvesting cotton I called home crying. They came to get me, but the faculty dean didn’t give me permission to leave. He said I could be dismissed from the university, so I had to stay. I never picked cotton before. During my college years my family got me a medical certificate and kept me at home. That’s why I can’t pick that much cotton. There is a daily quota. We have to pick 60 kilo or at least 40 kilo a day. Otherwise they will call a meeting in the evenings and embarrass the ones who couldn’t pick the quota in front of everyone. Besides, they always deduct 23-25 kilo of cotton for food. I can barely pick 20 kilos a day. Cotton is very light! Let alone getting paid for this work, I’m getting into more debt every day. Students from previous years told us that the debt accumulates until the end of the season, and once we are back to university they will make us pay it straight away. I’m very surprised about all this!”

College teacher, Gulistan, Syrdarya region, 28.09.2014:

“I have picking cotton every day for the last 8 days. At 6:30 in the morning all the organisations gather in front of city hall and are taken to the fields by 7. So the harvest starts by 7:30 in the morning and lasts until 12:40 or 13:00, when we break for weighing. By then we all are hungry and exhausted. Weighing takes place two times a day: once in the afternoon around 13:00 and again the around 17:30. Yesterday the day was hot, and the water people brought with themselves finished quickly. The water brought by the farmer was very little and wasn’t enough for everyone. Some people complained and demanded water. A young man assigned by the local government to be in charge of the harvest at that field shouted at women as old as his mother to shut up, that they will get paid for the work they are doing. He yelled so much that everyone became quiet. So they frighten us like that, or they threaten to call to the school director and tell him to ‘educate’ us by giving warnings and stuff. Naturally we obey the director and are afraid of his attitude.”

College Teacher, Gulistan, 30.09.2014:

"I graduated from the university three years ago. I first picked cotton as a schoolgirl, then while studying in college, thereafter while studying at the University. As I began to teach in college it started again: regular public "Saturdays" (collective cleaning), street cleaning, weeding cotton fields in the spring, and long days during the cotton harvest. I have a small

child, so I hired a worker to replace me. This month it cost me 450,000 sum (\$150 USD). That's almost my full monthly salary.”

School teacher, Chilonzor district, Tashkent, 30.09.2014

UGF: Have you been engaged in the cotton harvest this year?

Salima: "I came to harvest cotton, because I did not have the money to pay my way out of it. We were sent to the Zarbdor area of the Jizzakh region. We were living in appalling conditions, and then we had to find an apartment to rent from local people and pay for it ourselves. We have been also paying for meals from our own pocket. First we were told that we would harvest for 10 days. We came here to the field on September 17th. We have been here since 12 days, and they still have not relieved us. Another teacher is currently teaching my subject at the school. All educational institutions to a greater or lesser extent lack teachers due to cotton harvesting. The teaching plans are interrupted. The quality of education continues to deteriorate. Some teachers hired day laborers to work at the cotton harvest instead of them. However, they still continue to give lessons, and there is a considerable lack of teachers. Someone still have to give lessons to children. The remaining teachers conduct all subjects randomly. A chemistry teacher gives lessons in sport; a mathematics teacher gives classes in literature, etc.”

UGF: What is your attitude to the involvement of teachers, businessmen, doctors and others in cotton harvesting?

Salima: “Of course negative. But it is a state policy.”

Teacher at Almalyk Mining and Metallurgical Professional College at Almalyk Mining and Metallurgical Works (AMMW), Tashkent region, 02.10.2014:

UGF: How has the cotton harvest affected your work?

Nigora: “Although we belong to AMMW and it is a completely different sector, we are engaged in cotton harvesting. First, third-year students went to pick cotton in the Telman farm of Buka District. Second, some of the teachers are involved in cotton harvesting: some of them accompany the students and look after them; others are engaged as pickers. Third, we have to replace absent teachers, combining lessons. Sometimes one teacher gives lessons for two – three different groups, in different rooms, and in different subjects. What can we do? We give lessons in subjects in which we do not have expertise. We just let students learn on their own what they have to learn according to the study plan, leave them in the classroom

and return at the end of the lesson. Some lessons fail completely if the teacher is not there. After returning back (in about 10 – 12 days) he gives intensive lessons, i.e. 2 – 3 lessons per day. It is difficult for students to learn. It is in general not good. There are mostly no educational processes during that time, only an appearance. Only on paper everything is fine.

Those teachers who did not go to harvest cotton had to pay 300.000 sums. This money was taken from their salary, for transportation, living and accomodations for the cotton pickers. I know that my neighbour gave 600,000 UZ sum (approx. \$200) so his son, a third-year-student, doesn't have to go to the cotton harvest. Now the guy is working at a car wash, in order to somehow compensate for his parents payment."

UGF: How do you feel about the fact that students and teachers are engaged in cotton harvesting?

Nigora: "Of course very negative! What could be good in this? They say that they get educated though the labour. This is nonsense. A person is not brought up that way. There are terrible conditions. The attitude toward work has to be taught systematically over the years. This way, the children are not brought up to love to work and respect working people. There they hate work, and none of them wants to be a hard worker. Everyone is thinking about how to escape from that kind of life. Everyone will be happy if this practice would end."

Teacher at the Academic Lyceum at the National University of Uzbekistan, 02.10.2014:

"All male teachers of our lyceum were sent to harvest cotton. The same happened with young female teachers. They collected money - 400,000 sums (\$130) - from the rest, saying that it is "for the needs of cotton farmers." The classes of absent teachers have to be taught by those who remained. Since all sport teachers were male, there are currently no sport classes."

High school teacher, Gulistan, 02.10.2014:

"This year is especially difficult. We work without weekends. Every seven days, it comes the turn to go to work in the field. I leave my children with my mother and leave for 10 days. It has been 16 days since the cotton harvest began, and I still haven't had a single day of rest. To tell the truth, I am so fed up that I am thinking of going to Russia. If we get the documents, then we can go away for good. Now it seems that there are classes, however just formally/officially. 50% of teachers are at cotton harvesting. How it is possible to work fully in such circumstances? It would be easier to close the school for the harvest time."

II. INDEPENDENT MEDIA REPORTS



Tashkent region college teachers, 04.10.2014

Students of Agro- Service college hungry in Khatirchi cotton fields

Third year students of the Agro- Service vocational college were left without food on 18th of September while picking cotton at the Akhmad Yorlakabov farm in Khatirchi district, Navoi region.

A Khatirchi resident reported the situation after talking with the students in a village shop:

“Yesterday evening I went to the village shop. Students in the area to pick cotton were buying food. I asked them why they were buying so much food, whether they weren’t getting enough food. They said that there was no food left, and they didn’t cook for students. Instead, the teachers told them to find their own food,” said the Khatirchi resident.

Radio Liberty managed to contact one of the students of the college in Khatirchi. Speaking anonymously, the student told us that they had to collect money to buy food from a shop, because they were left without food:

"Yesterday we came back from the cotton field all so tired, but there was no dinner. We waited until half past nine. Nothing happened. Then we collected money to buy something to eat from a local shop in the village and ate it with water before we went to bed," said the student.

Students who were sleeping in school No. 17 in Khatirchi also complained about bad living and working conditions:

"We were placed in a classroom. The floor has holes and broken parts. Water is a problem. There are no washing facilities. Our teacher says that after ten days he will permit us to go home one by one to bathe. They bring unsanitary drinking water to the cotton field too. Children pick cotton from 7 in the morning until 6-7 in the evening. We are tolerating such conditions," said the student.

Isom Toshem, an official from the Khatirchi district administration responded to an inquiry from Radio Liberty by saying that he didn't know the students were left without food:

"College students recently came. But honestly I have no idea that they were left hungry. I will check this incident now, and we will solve all the shortcomings quickly," said the government official.

"Хатирчи Агросервис коллежи ўқувчилари пахтада оч қолди," Radio Ozodlik, 19.09.2014, <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/26595399.html>.

Uzbek government monitoring group says that there is no forced labour in this cotton harvest

According to a report issued by the Federation of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan (FTUU), the government is monitoring child labour across the whole country during this cotton harvest.

The report stated that eight teams comprised of the Labor Ministry, Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Uzbekistan, FTUU and local nongovernment organisations visited cotton fields across the country between September 18 and 25 to assess whether there is child labour.

Experts of the International Labour Organisation, who were expected to participate in this monitoring, only gave the monitoring teams technical support.

The Federation of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan also reported the conclusions of the monitoring teams, which visited fields in the regions of Tashkent, Sirdarya and Dzizzakh. According to the Federation, the monitors concluded that conditions for cotton pickers met the standards: the monitors found no children under the age of 18 in the cotton fields and people were participating in cotton harvesting voluntarily.

According to the conclusions of the national monitoring teams, cotton pickers live in good, sanitary conditions and are provided with good quality food. They report that the pickers are also paid with cash every five days.

At the same time, ordinary people from Uzbekistan- college and university students and public-sector- have sent dozens of letters and reports to Radio Liberty saying that they are forced to sign acknowledgement letters stating that “they go voluntarily” to pick cotton and are forcibly sent to pick cotton in the fields.

“Ўзбек мониторинг гуруҳи “пахта мавсумида мажбурий меҳнат йўқ” демоқда,” Radio Ozodlik, 24.09.2014, <http://www.ozodlik.org/archive/News/20140924/402/850.html>.

“We had to hire people to pick cotton in our place, otherwise they won’t let us to open our shops,” reported businessmen at the Kok Bozor market in Jizzak.

According to the businessmen, authorities ordered them and other business owners at the market to close starting September 22, and the merchants were only permitted to open their shops at 5 o’clock in the afternoon.

“Our work place is situated along a central road, but we are not permitted to open. Local police officers come in the morning and close us down. If we don’t close the shops, they threaten to confiscate our computers. Because of cotton harvest, apparently they received orders to do this,” said one of the merchants.

The businessmen also reported that they are hiring and sending day labourers to pick cotton instead of going themselves. Merchants who don’t hire labourers are not allowed to open their shops at all.

“We are sending laborers in our place to pick cotton, and even then we are told to open our shops only after five in the afternoon. If we don’t send the labourers, they won’t let us open our shops at all. We pay 10.000 soms per day for the laborer, and

he also keeps the payment for the cotton he picks. From the 22nd of September, it is very strict, they closed markets and everywhere else, - says the merchant from Djizzakh who wanted to stay anonymous.

“Пахтага чиқмасанг жазоланасан, жазоланмаслик учун пахтага чиқасан,” Radio Ozodlik, 24.09.2014, <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/26603440.html>

Schoolchildren who were picking cotton in Nishon were brought back to school

After Radio Liberty reported to local government officials that schoolchildren in Nishon district of Kashkadarya region were picking cotton, the children were returned to school.

9th-grade schoolchildren, typical age 15, were picking cotton in the cotton fields of Nishon district, Kashkadarya region. Kashkadarya resident Mansur reported this to Radio Liberty:

“At the moment, 9th-grade schoolchildren and college students are picking cotton here. They are the children of Nishon and Dehkonobod districts,” - said Mansur.

Nishon district administration officials denied that the children under the age of 18 were sent to pick cotton. Radio Ozodlik checked with Nishan district authorities. Officials of the local government and prosecutor’s office went to the fields and sent the children who were picking cotton back to school.

“They came to the fields and took all the children back to school. Then the children’s parents, some of whom are elderly, replaced them in the fields. Apparently, the parents had sent their children in their place, as they were not feeling well. Officials from the prosecutor’s office went and took the children back,” said Mansur.

“Нишонда пахта тераётган ўқувчилар мактабга қайтарилди,” Radio Ozodlik, 26.09.2014, <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/26607142.html>

As the cotton season continues in Uzbekistan, the number of letters received by Radio Liberty from their listeners is increasing.

Currently, Radio Liberty receives letters from medical workers who are picking cotton in Jizzak region on a daily basis. One of the letters stated:

"We are in Dostlik district of Jizzak region to pick cotton. Here, in this cotton field there are a lot of pensioners. The poor women barely fulfil the quota. Our head

doctor has sent doctors for 10 years, but this year he added 5 more days to our shifts in the cotton fields. Yesterday it was very hot in the fields. There was no shade or water. We finished the water we brought with us by ten in the morning. They force us to go to pick cotton as early as 5:30 in the morning. We return from the fields around 6 in the afternoon. I'm 46 years old and have hypertension. I almost lost my mind in this heat. The toilets are full. There are no proper conditions. We live in the 5th school district in Manas village, Dostlik district. Yesterday a woman called Nargiza, who was hired from Navoi, was taken to the hospital after suffering a heart attack. The doctors returned her saying that she won't live. The head of the field ordered the overseer to call a taxi, and they sent her home. People don't have any compassion left. That girl was sent home to her mother and her stepfather. When I asked to find a car I was told that she was faking it, that they already spent on petrol and her visit to the hospital. Shame on humanity," wrote the medical worker.

“Қумқўрғон бозори пахта теримида ёпиб қўйилди,” Radio Ozodlik, 26.09.2014,
<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/26592307.html>.

Uzbekistan: Minors on cotton plantations despite bans

Second-year college students, ages 16-17 were sent to to pick cotton last week in Samarkand. The mobilization of the students to the cotton fields was in clear violation of strict government orders prohibiting minors from agricultural labour. (See the report by Samarkand-based journalist Tashpulat Rakhmatullayev here: <http://www.fergananews.com/articles/8243>.)

At least two schools in Samarkand sent teenaged students to cotton fields: a medical college and a medical lyceum [colleges and lyceums are the equivalent of high schools in Western education systems]. According to parents, the administrations of these schools threatened to expel students who would not travel to cotton fields and pick cotton.

[Passage omitted by Fergana News: city-based organizations and institutions forced employees to pick cotton, and local residents are picking cotton and selling it to people from the city who are required to meet quotas.]

“Uzbekistan: Minors on cotton plantations despite bans,” Fergana News, 30.09.2014,
<http://enews.fergananews.com/news.php?id=2852&mode=snews>.

“If you don't go to pick cotton, you will be punished. If you don't want to be punished, you have to go to pick cotton”

Radio Liberty contacted Uzbekistani citizens and asked for their responses to the statement made by the government-led monitoring group that they did not identify people forced to go to pick cotton in this current cotton season. The monitoring group includes the Labour Ministry, Federation of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan, Chamber of Commerce & Industry of Uzbekistan and Farmers Associations and is advised by the International Labour Organization. The response is that if you don't pick cotton, you will be punished; and if you don't want to be punished, you have to pick cotton.

“We were told at the start of the cotton season that everyone has to go to pick cotton; those who refuse to go will be punished. We were also told that those who won't go to pick cotton will suffer throughout the school year; they will have to retake the exams, receive warnings, and might be expelled. After that we had to go pick cotton,” said female student.

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/26603440.html>

Forced cotton pickers in Uzbekistan told to keep quiet about their cotton work

Yet another method of preventing human rights activists from collecting accurate information on forced labour in the cotton sector was observed in the fields this past weekend: Secret service employees ran ahead of activists and “advised” cotton pickers to keep silent.

Elena Urlaeva, the head of the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan, experienced this new method first-hand during her monitoring activities on September 28 in the cotton fields near the town of Krasnogorsk, Parkentsky district, Tashkent region.

Urlaeva reported that young men in two cars followed her from Tashkent. As soon as she stopped near a cotton field they ran out ahead and told cotton pickers not to speak with her.

As a result the activist was unable to collect much relevant information from the cotton pickers. One elderly woman told her that she was 66 years old and was working instead of her daughter-in-law, who has a newborn baby.

Another cotton picker, a teacher from School No. 19 from the village of Dustlik in Verhnechirchiksky district, said that many parents of her students are working in the fields.

The young men who followed Urlaeva, who she believes to be from the country's security services (SNB), did not stop her from taking photographs. Instead, they told her that she was collecting “information that creates a negative image of her country” and asked her how she would use the images.

The activist says that she noticed being followed after she appealed to the Cabinet of Ministers on September 22 to “immediately discontinue the extortion of money [for the cotton harvest] by regional governors and chairs of citizen councils.”

The official who received Urlaeva at first refused to accept her petition and called the police. His plan backfired when uncharacteristically the police unit that arrived on the scene actually made him accept the petition from the activist.

Urlaeva says that she has been followed by two cars since then, and they do not attempt to hide from her, actually following her inside businesses and doctor’s offices.

Reporting from the cotton fields: No agricultural equipment and exhausted cotton pickers

“I have not seen any agricultural equipment in the fields of Tashkent province. Everybody is harvesting cotton by hand, and cotton pickers look exhausted,” said the activist.

The activist has reached the conclusion that “most Uzbek citizens are being forced to pick cotton.” She added that she has seen “minors, pregnant women, women with small children, and the elderly” picking cotton.

“Forced cotton pickers in Uzbekistan told to keep quiet about their cotton work,” UzNews, 30.09.2014, <http://www.uznews.net/en/human-rights/27768-forced-cotton-pickers-in-uzbekistan-told-to-keep-quiet-about-their-cotton-work>.