

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

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Slaves for the fall season:

In the Khorezm region of Uzbekistan alone, the authorities are planning to send 170,000 schoolchildren to the cotton harvest – and there is documentary evidence

Every year during the cotton harvest season, the Uzbek authorities turn a significant part of the population – students, schoolchildren, civil servants, workers, even housewives and pregnant women -- into slaves. They have various means of coercing the population into this employ, but there is a special role played by the prosecutor office and the police.

In the middle of September 2011, we received a copy of a document which demonstrates the wide-scale involvement of the state apparatus in the coercion and repression used to conduct the cotton campaign. This is a press-release prepared by the Interior Ministry of Khorezm region (full text and translation is in the appendix). This kind of press release is distributed among the local mass media and participants of the staff meetings which take place nearly every evening at the provincial and district authorities over the course of the cotton harvest season.

The document clearly mentions the centralized mobilization of students and children to pick cotton:

«In order to have a quality harvest, in the 2011 harvest, we will have a short time frame to mobilize cotton-pickers, a total of 202,641 people, including 34,800 students from colleges, and high schools. 463 temporary residencies (302 field barracks – shipona), 109 houses of citizens, 52 tents, etc., have been prepared for their accommodation».

What does this figure of 202,641 people mean? If there are 34,800 college students, then it turns out that the remaining 167,841 are mostly schoolchildren. Taking into account that the population of Khorezm constitutes 6% of all 13 cotton cultivating regions of Uzbekistan, one can extrapolate with sufficient certainty, the number of schoolchildren mobilized to pick cotton each in the entire country. This number, according to our calculations, is 2,797,350 persons, or at the very least, two and a half million children.

The subjects of this forced labor are not only schoolchildren and students, but the farmers themselves. Criminal proceedings are brought against those who plant anything other than cotton in their fields, such as more profitable crops, or those who allow livestock to graze in their fields. Two typical details from the press release of the Ministry of Internal Affairs:

1) *«As a result of measures taken by law enforcement bodies, we have identified 230 cases of rice cultivation without permission, and among them 222 cases at farms and 8 cases of partial allotments, a total of 941 hectares.. According to these facts, materials were prepared and brought to the courts to take action in accordance with the law».*

2) *«...June 2, 2011 in the village Boshkirshik, Yangibazar district, in the cotton field at the “Istikbol” farm, owned by Atadjanov Saparboy (date of birth: 09/30/1956), one cow trampled down 293 cotton bushes on a 95.4 square kilometer area».* For information, the cow belonged to the same farmer. For this «offence» his cow was confiscated, slaughtered, and the meat was passed on to other agencies

This document demonstrates that: the Government of Uzbekistan does not intend to change anything in the command economy taking root in the cotton industry, with its usual practice of mass forced labor sent to pick cotton each autumn. The ratification by the government of Uzbekistan of the International Labor Organization Conventions 138 and 182 on child labor, and the adoption of several laws to protect children's rights, seems to be designed just to mislead the international community, without any intention to implement in practice.

It is not surprising therefore that the Government of Uzbekistan does not allow an ILO mission to visit the country during the cotton harvesting season to conduct an independent observation.

In our view, the only way to persuade the Uzbek government to stop the Stalinesque practice of forced labor – is to conduct a boycott of its cotton and textiles.

We call upon the European Parliament not to approve the protocol on preferential export for Uzbek textiles to Europe and to annul the Generalized System of Preferences for Uzbek cotton and textiles.

Source: Press-release, Association Droits de l'Homme en Asie Centrale, 27.09.2011

Uzbekistan, "News from the Fields": The cotton picking children, teachers, doctors, musicians, policemen.

Fergana.ru news web reports that, in current year, not only people who live in regions, but also people who live in capital of the country are also being involved in cotton harvesting.

For instance, the teachers of Uspenskiy music school in Tashkent (now it is called academic lyceum) were all taken to Jizzakh region to pick cotton.

According to what students of this music school told Ferghana.ru reporter, there are around 50 teachers including professional musicians, were sent to pick cotton.

But those who do not want to take part in this "voluntary- forced" cotton harvesting can pay 300 thousand soms (approximately \$125 US dollars) and stay away from this forced labour, they report.

"In Karakalpagistan children between 12 years old and 16 years old are all sent to pick cotton. Even the police sent more than hundred staff members from Ellikkala, Beruniy and other district offices to Jizzakh to pick cotton. And rail- men in Khorezm were sent to fields in Sirdarya region", reports Ferghana.ru.

In Yangiyul district of Tashkent regions, you can see a sign in markets and shops which reads: "Everyone to pick cotton". But despite the signs, all markets and shops are working. The salespeople are not even trying to hide that they bribed local authorities and tax inspection offices to get out of the field labour as well as hired labourers to pick cotton instead of their places.

According to the article published on the website, all the people who work in government jobs and students of schools and colleges in Chirchiq city have been in the fields since mid September. The Neighbourhood chiefs were assigned to send 100 people from each neighbourhood to pick cotton.

"All the schools in the city are closed for holidays, because teachers have gone to pick cotton. Even the private organisations have to pay 300 thousand soms per staff to keep them away from fields. It is now the end of the month and the tax office is not accepting any reports from those who are not attending the cotton campaign", - says one of the residents of Chirchik.

Human rights defenders alliance of Uzbekistan gathered information about how child labour is used every year in cotton fields of all regions in Uzbekistan.

The leader of the Alliance Elena Urlaeva says that in Karakalpagistan and other areas of the country all the college and school children were taken to fields to hoe the cotton plants starting from May 10th after the school hours or sometimes even for the whole day. Children had to work in 40 degree hot weather.

Starting from 12th September, the students of colleges and schoolchildren in Karakalpagistan are being sent to outer districts to pick cotton. In Andijan and Jizzakh regions 7- 9th grade children pick cotton in the fields not too far from where they live. Those children age between 8 and 18 years old.

Children who were brought to the cotton fields were accommodated in such places as village schools, local administration offices or warehouses where the conditions do not meet the quality standards. These temporary accommodation places are guarded by police or special security people.

Children work from early 7:00 in the morning till 18- 19:00 in the evening. They are paid for each kilo they pick around 100 and 125 soms (4- 5 cents). In some places they do not get paid at all for their work, the money is kept as a payment for the food. The daily target for children is between 20 kilo and 60 kilo per day and sometimes even more than that.

"The Human rights defenders' alliance of Uzbekistan calls the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural rights and other independent experts to investigate the facts about the use of forced child labour in Uzbekistan", - writes the news website.

Source: FerganaNews, 30.09.2011

<http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=7118>

Elena Urlaeva: '8 year old children are forced to pick cotton'

Elena Urlaeva the member of Human Rights Defenders Alliance of Uzbekistan reported to the BBC that 8 year old children are being forced to do illegal labour in a very bad conditions in some places of Uzbekistan.

"We have been in Bukhara, Khorezm and Navoi regions and the Autonom Republic of Karakalpak. Children are being exploited in cotton fields massively. Children as young as 8 year old are pickin cotton in the fields from early 7:00 in the morning, till very late." says the human rights activist.

She also told how she witnessed that the 2nd grade children were picking cotton in Jondor district of Bukhara, Turtkul and Beruniy districts of Karakalpak Autonom republic.

"We saw how schoolchildren were sleeping in the afternoon on the ground in grades, how they sleep on the floor in those ghetto type of farmhouses. You could see the same scenery in everywhere, no schools, all people are in the fields".

According to Elena Urlaeva's words, the worst situation is in Karakalpagistan.

"At least in other regions children and students get some kind of hot food or something else, but in Karakalpagistan, children have to bring their food with them from home. They don't feed them in the field."

Urlaeva also says that in all regions the cotton fields are strictly guarded by civilian dressed police and staff from prosecutor's office.

"Very rarely I introduce myself as human rights activist. Most of the time, we were saying that we were Russian tourists, who lost their ways. Because if we said we were human rights defenders, then they would remove us from the fields immediately. I even introduced myself in Tashkent region as unemployed who wanted to earn up some cash. They took me to a school #54 and registered me. There I saw that 5-9 grade schoolchildren were taken to the fields to pick cotton. I left with those schoolchildren to the field to pick cotton. They gave me a grade and said that I would be paid 125 soms per kilo I pick,- she said."

Human rights defenders said that they have documented the evidences of child labour and will present their findings to the Uzbek authorities.

"Uzbek goverment denies the use of child labour saying that there is no proof of it. So we now have documented everything. We have got photo and video materials. We want to present them in the first place, to the human rights ombudsman", - said Elena Urlaeva.

Source: BBC, 2.10.2011

http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/uzbekistan/2011/10/111002_cy_cotton_urlayeva.shtml

Local authorities are persecuting the farmer who refused to give them bribes.

Safargul Kuryozova the resident of Shovvot district in Khorezm region told The Initiative Group of human rights defenders of Uzbekistan that she and her family have been subjected to cruel persecution of the local authorities.

Shortly after the new decree of Uzbek government about optimizing the lands of farming agriculture, the land of the farmers Safargul Kuryozova and her husband Rahmatilla Nurjonov has been expanded up to 120 hectares.

“In February of 2009 Bozorboy Yokubov the mayor of Shovvot district and the district prosecutor Jiyonboy Norimbetov asked me to pay them 10 million soms of bribe (equiv. \$7000 US dollars) I did not have that amount of money, but then they demanded me to plant rice on the 20 hectares of land for cotton and give him the crop of 10 hectares. Another 5 hectare crop for the district prosecutor and the rest for the head of the police”.- says Safargul Kuryozova.

As they refused to fulfil their demands, the mayor, prosecutor and the head of the police started slandering her and her family in order to open a criminal case against them. They attempted to confiscate their lands and give them to other farmers, to expel them from their house and to accuse her son in raping their neighbour's daughter.

Safargul Kuryozova's complaints to the regional mayor's office and regional law enforcement agencies over the harassments were left un- responded.

According to the reports of the Initiative group, in 7th May of 2009 a group of armed policemen and their leader Sardor Kuronboev the head of the police criminal department invaded her house and beat Safargul Kuryozova and her two daughters in law who were 7 and 8 months pregnant.

The policemen took from farmer's house their TV, fridge, air conditioner and their Nexia car with them.

S. Kuryozova was placed in hospital with different injuries. Her daughters in law had miscarriage as a result of the beatings.

On top of all that Kuryozova's husband R. Nurjonov was accused of beating his neighbour and was arrested. He was cruelly beaten up in order to take his confessions.

“During my husband's investigation process, I sent telegrams many times to the President's office, to the Parliament and ministries and after a month my husband was released. They used administrative punishment and he had to pay 800 thousand soms fine.

As a result of mayor's harassments her son Suyunbek was also accused of helping his father to beat their neighbour Gulsara Turaeva and even though they did not have any facts, they sentenced him for a year of conditional imprisonment.

Bahodir Polvonov the judge of the Shovvot district criminal court asked her to give him 5 thousand US dollars bribe in order for him to solve the case of father and son positively. As a result, the woman had to give him in total 1500 US dollars and 150 kilo of large grain of rice.

In 2010 the prosecutor's office of Shovvot district had opened a criminal case against Safargul Kuryozova.

Apparently, the investigations on Safargul Kuryozova have been going on for the last three years. Her case has been seen in different district courts of Khorezm region and later, it was sent to Karakaplagistan Supreme Court and then from there to Bukhara city court for reviewing.

During this period of time, on the 2nd of September 2010, the hokim (mayor) of Shavat district returned the farmer's land. For this, the farmer had to pay 2000 dollars and gave 10 tons of rice and 10 tons of wheat.

Ms Kuryozova who has had enough of continuous trial processes had no choice left but trying to burn herself in front of the official house of the president of Uzbekistan. But the representative of Tashabbus group (Initiative group) of independent human rights defenders found out about her intentions and brought her to his office.

Tasahbus group reported that, Safargul Kuryozova is on a search list at the moment.

According to the latest reports, Bozorboy Yakubov the mayor of Showot district has been prosecuted and he is in interrogation process. The new mayor of the district Kadamboy Kuryozov told the representative of the Tasahbus group that he would stop persecuting Rahmatulla Nurdjonov and Safargul Kuryozova and assist them in solving their problems.

Source: Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders, press-release, 2.10. 2011

Mosque imams have been involved in picking cotton in Uzbekistan.

The Radio Liberty reports that it was the first time ever that imams in Uzbekistan were involved in cotton harvesting.

The Radio has gathered information from branch offices of department of religion of Uzbekistan and according to this information, the imams were assigned with four tasks during the cotton season.

Firstly, imams will pick cotton and contribute to the several tons of Uzbek cotton crop.

The second task is to preach those children, students, workers and other layers of the population to pick cotton and do some explanatory preaching.

The third task is to recite Koran in the fields and ask Allah for prosperous crop.

And lastly to financially encourage those cotton growers, who come from low income families. These are the four tasks imams were assigned to do during the cotton season.

The Radio Liberty also reports that when they attempted to get in touch with several mosques from different areas of the country, they received the same answer - "everyone is in cotton fields".

Consequently, for instance in Jizzakh, one of the imams of Koshchinor Mosque says that imams and other staff who work in 171 mosques across the region are, in average picking 20 tons of cotton per day.

"The Mosques in the region are sending 40- 50 workers to pick cotton. I have been there the other day. I picked 35 kilo, there is no daily target for us. Elderly imams are picking 20-30 kilo a day", - said the imam of Koshchinor mosque in Jizzakh, who wanted to stay anonymous.

Apparently, the imams are used mostly in cotton season for preaching and promotional purposes.

"People have strong faith in what imams say. We go to homes of children who skip the fields to pick cotton and do some explanatory speeches. We also go from house to house to persuade people to go to pick cotton and then we also go to join them and pick cotton", - says the imam.

A staff member of Kosim Shayh mosque in Navoi noted that imams of this region are mostly busy with giving prayers and reciting duas from Koran.

According to his words, the office of religion assigned them to attend the cotton growers, to encourage them, to give prayers for farmers and peasants. The staff members of mosques and respectable elders and khadjas are visiting the fields and fulfilling these tasks.

The representative office of the Department of Religion in Uzbekistan came up with an initiative of financially encouraging and supporting the cotton growers who come from low maintained families.

"We give carpets and other expensive gifts to such cotton growers. And we prepare a full report of these gifts to the mayors and other relevant places", - says the imam of Koshchinor mosque.

Source: Ozodlik, 3.10.2011

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24347412.html>

Uzbekistan: EU Parliamentarians Reject Textile Deal With Uzbekistan

European Union parliamentarians have rejected a trade deal that would have eased Uzbekistan's export of textiles to Europe, citing the use of forced child labor in Uzbekistan's cotton industry, Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe reported.

The Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament voted unanimously against the inclusion of textiles in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), the pact that has governed EU-Uzbek trade since 1999. The vote prevented a lowering of tariffs on EU imports of Uzbek cotton, which make up at least 25 percent of Uzbekistan's exports.

The language of the legislation now stipulates that the inclusion of textiles "should only be put to the vote by Parliament after international observers, and in particular the International Labor Organization (ILO), have been granted by the Uzbek authorities close and unhindered monitoring."

The Uzbek government has failed to invite the ILO to inspect cotton fields during the harvest season, despite calls from employers and unions at the ILO annual meeting as well as human rights groups.

In February, the European Council approved an amendment to the PCA, extending the customs and tariffs breaks to Tashkent. But the European Parliament had yet to approve it, and it still had to go through committees.

EU members of parliament became concerned about increasing reports of the exploitation of children in the cotton harvest. A coalition of international labor and human rights organizations, joined with Uzbek human rights groups working both inside the country and in exile, have been advocating for some years with MEPs to try to stop forced child labor, especially after Uzbekistan ratified the ILO convention against the worst forms of child labor in 2009.

In June, the EU Parliament held a hearing on the issue and heard testimony from Anti-Slavery International and other NGOs campaigning against forced labor.

Joanna Ewart-James, Supply Chain Program Coordinator at Anti-Slavery International testified:

Ninety percent of Uzbek cotton is picked by hand, with almost half being picked by state-sponsored forced child labor. Uzbekistan is not a country with which we should be doing business and clearly not with the cotton and related sectors.

Nicole Kiil-Nielsen, a French MEP, asked on her blog why the agreement should be signed, when Tashkent wouldn't allow the ILO to monitor the cotton harvest. Liam Aylward, an Irish MEP also issued a press release on the issue, and Catherine Bearder and Leonidas Donskis, MEPs from England and Lithuania respectively, lodged queries with the European Commission.

The European Parliament's International Trade Committee must next vote on the measure on November 22, and the vote in plenary is expected in December.

Uzbekistan has generally denied that it uses young children in the harvest, although monitors this season have found children as young as 10 in the 4th and 5th grades sent to work in the fields.

ILO signatories can allow children 15 years or older to work after school, and children of 14 years under certain conditions. But unlikely other countries where agricultural work occurs in a family farm context, in Uzbekistan, local administrators remove students from middle school through college from classes, and then bus them to the cotton fields under threat of penalties for themselves and their families. In the state-controlled agricultural sector, even nominally private farmers must meet quotas and accept fixed prices for their produce.

UNICEF has been permitted by the Uzbek government to make some limited observation of the cotton harvest, but has cautioned that this is not a substitute for the kind of thorough monitoring that the ILO could do of labor practices.

Source: EURASIANET.org, 05.10.2011
<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64272>

Human rights activist beaten up in Jizak region

President of the Jizak regional branch of the International Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (MOPChU), Ziudullo Razokov, was beaten up by the headmaster of the local school at which Razokov works as a teacher.

Bakhtior Elmuradov, headmaster of school No.1 in Jizak's Zarbdar district, allegedly beat up Ziudullo Razokov at the end of the day's cotton harvesting as pupils and teachers were getting ready to go home.

Elmuradov has been the leader of Zarbdar district's department of education for many years, and as such has clashed frequently with Razokov, who as a human rights campaigner has been critical of his working conditions on many levels. Elmuradov was made headmaster of the school in July this year, since when the conflict between the two men has been particularly heated.

Razokov gave an interview to Ozodlik radio on 19th September in which he described how children in classes 8 and 9 were being taken out to harvest cotton, and were being loaded into trucks 60 at a time, "like sacks of potatoes."

On 28th September, in a separate interview with the same radio station, Razokov mentioned that children were being asked to pay 400 sums each day to be transported to and from the cotton fields. He also said that in the fields, not only was there no boiled water, but sometimes no drinking water at all was provided.

On 3rd October, senator Olij Majils and Kurakbay Ergashev from the regional education department, and Komil Uralov, leader of the district education department, went out into the cotton fields, where Elmuradov told them of his intention to resign. The headmaster then decided to vent his anger on Razokov, began to shout at him and then to manhandle him.

Razokov, who was left bleeding from the assault, was given first aid then released, whereupon he decided to report the incident to the police.

On 4th October, the police came to Razokov's home and asked him to provide evidence of the incident that had taken place the day before. Razokov says that if this case is not taken up by the authorities and dealt with through the courts, he will make a complaint to the regional prosecutor and the district branch of the national security service.

Source: Uznews, 05.10.11

http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=en&sub=hot&cid=3&nid=18075

Russian TV channel highlights child labour in Uzbekistan

The Russia Today TV channel carried a report on cotton production in Uzbekistan on 4th October, which gave a very negative account of the situation with regard to child labour in the country.

The piece was entitled "The fruits of child labour in Uzbekistan begin to trouble the fashion world," and featured images of children harvesting cotton in Uzbekistan, with voiceover commentary on the situation by the president of the Human Rights association in Central Asia, Nadezhda Atayeva, the leader of the Birdamlik ('solidarity') movement Bakhodyr Choriev and Human Rights Watch representative Steve Swerdlow.

"The parents have no rights," says Atayeva. "Some of them try and defend their children but the children are still obliged to work in the cotton fields, day and night, and many of them face violence."

On the TV film, Choriev says "The Karimov family are a gang of organised criminals: all sectors of the economy and all profitable industries are controlled by them."

"The Wikileaks site reveals that the US Ambassador in Uzbekistan refers to Gulnara Karimova as a mafia princess. But as long as the war in Afghanistan continues, no actions will accompany these words. As long as Islam Karimov remains a valuable ally of the US, they will turn a blind eye to these transgressions," Choriev believes.

Commenting on the ejection of Gulnara Karimova's GULI fashion label from New York Fashion Week, Steve

Swerdlow said that the cancellation of the show sends a powerful signal ‘to high-ranking officials of one of the most repressive regimes in the world.’

The Russian TV piece also shows a clip from an interview Karimova gave to Forbes magazine. Responding to her interviewer’s questions about how she created a successful business, Karimova says: “Well, as you may know, I graduated from Harvard. Such schooling gives you the tools to be independent.”

“Tools’ for Karimova are the children of Uzbekistan who, from the age of seven, may have to work a 70-hour week instead of going to school,” says the Russia Today correspondent Ekaterina Grachev.

Russia today, which began broadcasting in 2005, was the first Russian news channel to broadcast round the clock in English to ‘reflect Russia’s views on the key issues of international politics.’ Reporters without Borders describes the TV channel as a “mouthpiece of state propaganda.”

Source: Uznews, 05.10.11

http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=en&sub=hot&cid=4&nid=18068

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>

