

A CHRONICLE OF FORCED CHILD LABOUR: REPORTS FROM THE UZBEKISTAN COTTON HARVEST 2009

Week 6



Pesticides Harm Health in Cotton Fields

Synopsis: There are some bloggers (and authors!) downplaying the harm to children from their forced stints in the fields every autumn, cottoncampaign.org reports. Never mind that the work is exactly the kind referred to in the UN Convention on the [Worst Forms of Child Labor](#). The thinking goes, everyone did this back in college and it was a lark, just young people out in nature, enjoying their freedom...

It's clear, however, that times have changed from those kinder, gentler (!) Soviet days, when the much of Uzbekistan's cotton was picked by machine. Now, children are responsible for bringing in at least half the harvest and the coercion keeping them in the fields is much more intense. Even more, the process can and does compromise their health and well-being.

Pesticide and defoliant exposure

The picture you see here shows fields in early October this year after defoliants have been sprayed [this year cotton blossoming was late due to rains in the spring – our comment]. You will sometimes hear the argument that agrochemical use is much less than in Soviet times because the cost burden on the nominally independent *shirkat* farms is greater. But when the provincial government has to bring in the harvest to make their quotas, they find a way to get what they need.

A study published back in 1989 in the *Archives of Environmental Health* showed that fatigue, eye irritation, rhinitis, throat irritation, nausea, and diarrhoea were statistically elevated in rates adjusted for age, sex, and race and were reported 60-100% more frequently by respondents living or working near sprayed cotton fields than by the comparison group.

And that was just for people working *near* the fields. Imagine how you would fare if you were actually in them for 8-10 hours per day, with the residue all over your clothes and skin? And if you were an undernourished small child, for whom diarrhoea could be debilitating, even dangerous?

Original title: What's So Bad About Cotton Conscription Anyhow? Part 1: Toxins

Source: Cottoncampaign.org, 28.10.09.

Full version:

<http://www.cottoncampaign.org/2009/10/28/whats-so-bad-about-cotton-conscription-part-ii-violence-and-accidents/>

Uzbek General on the Cotton Field Front

Synopsis: A source from Arnasau district of the Jizak region told Radio Ozodlik that the Tashkent Police Academy has sent both instructors and students to the cotton fields. High-ranking officers, however, are sending local residents in their place, paying them double.

Farmers are working with their wives and children in the place of the officers in order to earn some extra cash to buy boots and provisions for the winter, as they have had difficulty getting money from banks.

Another source also said that the officers were paying 150 soums to go in their stead and pick a quota of 100 kilograms a day. Another farmer said that while there was no cotton remaining in the fields, school children as well as medical students were being sent into the fields.

Source: Radio Ozodlik, 30.10.09.

Full version: <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/1865299.html>

Bazaars and Stores Closed Until Dusk During Cotton Season in Uzbekistan

Synopsis: Ferghana residents say signs have been placed on bazaars saying that the marketplace is closed until 7 pm, driving merchants outside, Radio Ozodlik reports. Vendors have also sent people in their place to gather the harvest, paying them 3000-4000 soums per day and sending them in the khokimiyat's cars to the fields. Everyone, including teachers, physicians, students and drivers, is being driven to pick cotton during this time.

A college student in Kolikul district of Karakalpakstan told Radio Ozodlik that students were physically abused by teachers if they did not stay in the fields and pick their quota. Mamirzhon Azimov, a human rights activist from Jizak, told Radio Ozodlik that students and instructors, from lieutenants to generals, at the Tashkent Police Academy came to pick cotton at the Kazakhstan collective farm in Arnasau district in the Jizak region. They hired cotton pickers and paid them 150-200 Soums per kilometre, an amount higher than elsewhere in Uzbekistan.

Source: Radio Ozodlik/10/28/09. Translation and synopsis by OSI Central Eurasia Project

Full version: <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/1863446.html>

Uzbek Government reports the fulfilment of the directive plan on cotton

State controlled Gazeta.uz reported that the cotton farmers submitted 3.4 mln ton of raw cotton.

[The reference to directive plans harks back to Soviet cotton industry management practices, highlighting the command character of the cotton industry in Uzbekistan today – our comment]

The plan has been implemented by Andijan, Surkhandarya, Tashkent, Namangan, Ferghana and Karakalpakstan regions.

Source: Gazeta.uz, 30.10.2009

Full version: <http://www.gazeta.uz/2009/10/30/cotton/>

President Karimov failed to mention the contribution of schoolchildren in cotton harvest 2009

In his congratulatory speech praising the farmers with the fulfilment of the state order for cotton procurement, President Karimov has ‘forgotten’ to mention the contribution of school and college students who were sent to pick cotton this season.

In his speech, Mr. Karimov claimed that life in Uzbekistan’s villages is improving from year to year; their appearance is changing for the better and, most importantly, the way of thinking and worldview of rural populations is changing too. The culture of daily life, according to President, is becoming higher, and their confidence in future is becoming stronger.

Uznews.net brings examples that suggest a different reality. A single mother of a 12 year old schoolchild in Chinaz district of Tashkent Region told Uznews.net that her daughter went to pick cotton but that a portion of the wages she was given was withheld to be used for school repairs.

According to Mariyam, who sells vegetables at the Yangiyul city market in Tashkent region, from the beginning of the cotton campaign, the market administration would collect from 300 – 1000 soums on a daily basis to pay laborers, which the authorities said were being brought in from the Ferghana Valley, to work in the cotton fields. Also, at the beginning of the season, all the butchers in the market were expected to give 10 kg of meat, and the grocers, from 70 to 100 thousand soums [to finance the cotton campaign, thus freeing the government from the responsibility of financing the cotton harvest – our commentary].

Source: Uznews.net, 02.11.09.

Full version: http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=ru&sub=top&cid=2&nid=11816

Reward for Fulfilling Cotton Quotas – Presidential Praise, but No Electricity

Many residents of Zarbdar district, Jizak region, upon their return from the cotton fields, where they had fulfilled their cotton quota, discovered that their homes have been cut off from the electricity supply. The electricity in their homes are switched off in the evening from 6pm to 8pm, and again at night from midnight until 5am.

“This is the thanks we get for our labor?” ask the indignant people. But the local authorities do not heed their indignation, Uznews.net writes. They remain indifferent as people try to get by with kerosene lamps, giving their poor homes a truly medieval appearance.

Source: Uznews.net, 02.11.09.

Full version: http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=ru&sub=hot&cid=18&nid=11815

In Samarkand, Children Still in the Cotton Fields

Synopsis: Samarkand’s authorities, despite President Karimov’s announcement that cotton harvest is over, are not yet calling back students from the cotton fields, and, in fact, are attempting to increase the number of “volunteer” cotton pickers.

In the region, the rains have begun, a warm Indian summer abruptly grew cold, but the local authorities have been slow to declare the end of the cotton campaign – they have not fulfilled their deflated state order and are hoping to “finish it off,” sending people repeatedly to the barren fields.

This is the first time in years that the Samarkand region has failed to meet its cotton quota, says an employee of AgroProm [agro-industrial department at the local administration]. According to him, this has been due to unfavorable weather during the spring planting. Because of heavy rains in the spring, farmers had to re-sow the cotton, affecting its ripening in time for the harvest.

For the new khokim of Samarkand region, Uktam Barnoev, fulfilling the quota has been a test before President Karimov, with Barnoev’s position depending on delivering on it, according to

an instructor from one of Samarkand's higher education institutes. "That Barnoev doesn't give up trying to mobilize more people out into the fields," he says.

According to one farmer from a non-cotton growing district of Samarkand, he and two other workers were to be sent recently [to a neighboring cotton growing district] to pick cotton. But because of volume of work at his own farm, he could not go, and had to "buy himself off" from picking cotton, paying 20,000 Soums.

Agitators for the cotton harvest include imams of Samarkand's mosques, who [at the orders of the authorities] diligently urge people to go to the fields to pick cotton.

"My daughter was admitted on a contract basis to one of the higher education institutes in Samarkand" says on city resident. "It has been 40 days now since they took her away to pick cotton. She's lost a month and a half of studies; we are paying for her to study, not for her to pick cotton. In addition, once a week, we have to travel ourselves to feed her. How much this costs us and other parents!"

According to Article 8 of the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Youth," "it is forbidden to take students away from their studies for work during the academic term with the exception of such cases when the work is consistent with their chosen profession and is a form of work experience or in cases of voluntary collective or individual work by students during their free time. The specific work activities are permitted in cases in which there are contracts made in accordance with either labor or civil law."

To say that this law is violated – is meaningless. The reality, several elderly in Samarkand say, is that cotton for Uzbekistan's government has indeed become the gold which it will never give up.

Source: Uznews.net, 02.11.09

Full version: http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=ru&sub=hot&cid=2&nid=11817

Government Attempts to Revive Cotton Combine Production

Synopsis: According to the decree of the President of Uzbekistan "on measures for the further development and modernization of agricultural machinery," from April 7, 2008, Uzbekistan decided to revive domestic production of cotton harvest technology including harvester combines. For this, U.S. \$28 million were allocated from the Fund for Reconstruction and Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan, bank credits and the funds of enterprises. Resources were allocated for the modernization of the following companies: Tashkent Tractor Factory - \$25,030,200, Aggregate Factory - \$1,120,000, Joint Stock Companies "Chirchikkishlokmash" and "Tekhnolog" - \$928,000 and \$900,000 respectively.

This is the second attempt for Uzbekistan since Soviet times to supply agriculture with farming equipment. In the early 90's, Uzbekistan abandoned the use of domestic cotton technology and purchased machinery abroad. Nearly 1000 Case machines were purchased, and as a result, the "Tashselmash" factory, which had been the main producer of combines during the Soviet era, lost all of its government contracts, and eventually went bankrupt.

At the same time, the cost of an American Case is much higher than that of domestic combine-harvesters. In addition, the Case is more complex, and requires expensive maintenance. As a result, domestic farmers prefer [as the artificially low price of cotton leaves no funds for technical equipment] to abandon leased foreign machines, finding picking by hand more cost-effective.

According to the expert poll, today, in Uzbekistan's farms, there remains no more than 300 Case harvesters, which are actually not being used at all. And, in practice, there is not a single domestic harvester, although in Soviet times, there were more than 20,000 in the fields.

After a small upgrade of the earlier domestically produced combine-harvesters, the Joint Stock Company “Tekhnolog, ” has already begun domestic production of cotton harvesters, and plans by the end of this year to put out at least 45 combines. However, its price – 30,900,000 soums (about U.S. \$20,000) still remains prohibitive for most farmers.

Source: Uznews.net, 31.10.09.

Full version:

http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=ru&sub=usual&cid=2&nid=11788