

## A CHRONICLE OF FORCED LABOUR: REPORTS FROM THE UZBEKISTAN COTTON HARVEST 2012

Issue 3, September 18, 2012



### Authorities of Uzbekistan once again assure that they are not using child labour in the cotton harvest

07.09.2012

The spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan Jahon declares that child labour is not used in the cotton fields of the country and quotes the documents, which guarantee the protection of children. In particular, he mentioned the Civil Code (1995), Family Code (1998), legislation on „Social protection of disabled people“ (1991), „Health Care“ (1996), „Education“ (1997), „on Guarantees of the rights of child“ (2007) and others.

Further it says that Uzbekistan is a member country of the ILO since 1992 and has ratified 13 of the most important conventions of the organisation, including the „Convention concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment“ No. 138 and the „Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour“ No. 182.

Under the current legislation admission to employment in the country is allowed from the age of 16 and teenagers who reached the age of 15 can only be admitted into employment with a written consent of one of the parents or an official guardian, notes Jahon.

The use of child labour in agricultural farming work, including in cotton harvesting is not allowed, any type of violation regarding the child labour strictly will be prosecuted by law claims the MFA. The control over following the current legislation is carried out by various government bodies and agencies, including the the Office of the Ombudsman and its branches in the regions, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of People, offices of international organisations such as UNICEF and other NGOs, which work with the protection of the rights of the child and youth.

We need to note that the officials of the Uzbek government reassure the international society yearly, that the cotton harvesting campaign takes place without the participation of children. In May of 2008 Eldar Ganiev, the Minister of Foreign Economic Relations of Uzbekistan declared during the meeting with the International Cotton Advisory Committee in its Washington office that all the accusations

made regarding the Uzbek government and the use of child labour are false. He claimed that „children work in the agricultural industry of Uzbekistan in a legitimate and safe environment just like children in any other country in the world“, he emphasised that the „national legislation of Uzbekistan prohibits the practice of forced child labour“.

Nevertheless, civil activists, human rights defenders and journalists until the very end of last autumn discovered without any special efforts that the labour of children and youth was used in cotton harvesting.

<http://www.fergananews.com/news.php?id=19406&mode=snews>

## **Sending parents to the cotton harvest instead of the children**

The eighth International Uzbek Cotton and Textile Fair will be held in Tashkent on October 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, where, according to Uzbekistan's official mass-media, leading world traders will gather. As a result of continuing criticism against Islam Kadirov's regime, which already has a record of sending unfortunate city dwellers to "assist" farmers during the Soviet times, western countries gradually turn away from "Uzbekistan's white gold" – reason being the use of forced child and teenage labor.

However, it seems that the current cotton picking season is unique in Uzbekistan's modern history, as it is the first one where children are not being sent out to the cotton harvest, or at least in a limited number. Yet a set of data exists, showing that instead of children, parents and grandparents are being sent out.

The scope distinguishes past campaigns of compulsion of citizens to voluntary cotton picking from the present one. As a rule, salary and living costs during the stay at the cotton fields are assigned to the same organization – and that does not depend on property ownership. The budgetary organizations are not able to pay field workers' costs of food and accommodation. This means that the living costs of the cotton slaves are paid by state employees, from their pockets.

The essential difference between the present and the past campaign is the participation of power structure personnel in the allocation of people to the fields, as well as their supervision during the cotton harvest. Healthy young men in uniforms carry out the supervision by shouting at – and even beating – those who did not fulfill the production norms of cotton-picking or try to evade work.

Here are a few stories of those who are driven to pick cotton.

People were delivered by trains and subsequently accompanied (in buses) by military members to the place of cotton-picking in the Jizzakh Province. The accommodation conditions were different, depending simply on luck. Some were placed in form cowshed barracks, furnished only with blank sheds; others in buildings of a village school or even a college. Cotton pickers were generally deprived of access to hot water, and washing was allowed only against an extra fee. Considering the significant number of women brought from the cities, this occasion was very inopportune...

The work regime is as follows: getting up at 5.30 a.m., travelling to the field approximately for an hour, work starts at 7.00 a.m., lunch break is from 12.00 p.m. to 12.30 p.m., and then work continues until 19.00 p.m. On weekends and public holidays work continues without breaks.

The daily cotton quota was set at 60 kg per person. Military members and on occasion even police officers are pushing pickers not working fast enough, by shouting at the field during working hours. They are shouting at those who are not fulfilling the daily cotton quota and sometimes they even threaten that instances of corporal punishments are well known.

It is interesting that besides picking cotton for the farmers, it is possible to buy it from them for 200 Uzbek Sum per kilogram (approximately 7 cents; according to information from "Fergana", only pickers pay 150 Uzbek Sum per kilogram of raw cotton). That means it is in principle possible to buy the daily cotton quota for 12 000 Uzbek Sum, but not every public employee is able to spend this amount as the daily salary of these employees does not exceed the 12 000 Uzbekistan Sum limit.

Nevertheless, the farmers often agree with the security personnel to force pickers to buy cotton from them, although this is out of fear, not to fulfill the daily quota.

There are cases in which public and micro bus passengers - on their way to the city - are driven to the fields. According to information from public bus drivers, while exiting Tashkent public and micro buses passengers are often redirected and sent to the cotton fields by traffic police officers.

Currently, the cotton-picking campaign turned into a mix of business, extortion, speculation with food and employment of degrading slave labor. Those who make profit out of it are the central authorities, national security agents, local and rural chiefs, and even farmers. And of course transnational corporations are growing with the use of forced and dishonest labor.

## **Uzbekistan: those who send children to pick cotton will be strictly punished**

10.09.2012

The media service of The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of People in Uzbekistan stated that using child labour in the country will be strictly punished. "Using child labour in agriculture and farming, in particular, in cotton fields is not permitted", - said the media service of the ministry.

According to the Ministry, this regulation is now being observed by government, various agencies, UNICEF and many other international non-government organisations.

In Uzbekistan mobilising people to cotton harvest has already begun. It has been reported that Students and teachers of many educational institutions and employees of various companies are being taken to the cotton fields across the country.

The head of the human rights organisation Najot in Khorezm Khayitboy Yokubov tells the BBC that schoolchildren are not among those, who are sent to pick cotton:

"This year's cotton season in Khorezm is indeed quite different from the ones in previous years. Maybe not allowing young children to pick cotton became quite important, but thank god, children are not involved in cotton harvest and keep attending their schools".

The same scene has been confirmed by human rights activists from Kashkadarya too. But they say that the cotton season has just begun and it is too early to make big statements regarding this matter. Human rights activist Nodir Akhadov emphasises that underage children are still attending the harvest fields.

"In Karshi city just today university and two lyceum students were sent to pick cotton. Until now they were only taking company workers and neighbours. They haven't sent schools so far. But underage children study in those lyceums too", he says.

In recent years international organisations have been accusing Uzbekistan in using child labour widely. But they also added that sometimes children pick cotton voluntarily in order to help their parents. The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of People of Uzbekistan also noted that if the cotton is produced in a private family farm and children who want to help their families will not be against international standards.

This year it's been said that people would receive 250 soms the equivalent of 9 US cents per kilo of cotton. But according to reports, people will not get paid for the first 50 kilo of cotton they pick. Besides, the conditions where students, who were sent to pick cotton live have been criticised.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/uzbekistan/2012/09/120910\\_cy\\_uzbek\\_cotton.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/uzbekistan/2012/09/120910_cy_uzbek_cotton.shtml)

**The authorities of Uzbekistan denied the visit of German Bundestag to the country**

10.09.2012

German politicians and human rights activists expressed their regret in regards to the decision of the Uzbek authorities to deny a visit of the human rights committee delegation of the German Bundestag to the country.

Executive secretary of the "Greens" wing of the Bundestag Volker Beck, Member of the Bundestag from the political party SPD Angelika Graf and representative of CDU and expert of FDP on issues of integration policy Serkan Tören planned to visit Uzbekistan on 17-21 September. However, little before the trip the official in Tashkent cancelled the visit.

"Now it is cotton harvest season in the country and thousands of children are forced to work in inhumane conditions. The decision to cancel the visit of German delegation in this very period only indicates the unfavourable situation with the rights of the child and human rights in general", says the statement of Angelika Graf the representative of parliamentary human rights working group of Social Democratic Party, which was published on the party website on Monday 10 September.

Graf called the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Germany to pressure the Uzbek government to remove obstacles for the visit of German delegation. The MP noted that it is not the first attempt of Bundestag to organise visits to Uzbekistan during the year.

Human rights organisations Reporters without Borders and Uzbekistan Press Freedom Group also regret about the decision of government in Tashkent. While visiting the Central Asian country, German MPs were intending to raise the question of repressing the media and journalists, notes the press release of the Reporters without Borders.

The press release also notes that both of the organizations have put big hopes on the visit of German MPs to the strategically important country for Germany. Germany uses the military base in Termez as a passage to send military and other supplies to Afghanistan and as a result, Berlin holds a very careful relationship with Uzbekistan and tries not to touch human rights issues. Human rights activists are sure that it is all the more important for Bundestag MPs to visit the country and point out the problems from the place.

[http://www.dw.de/dw/article/0,,16230087,00.html?maca=rus-rss\\_ru\\_central\\_asia\\_news-5750-xml-mrss](http://www.dw.de/dw/article/0,,16230087,00.html?maca=rus-rss_ru_central_asia_news-5750-xml-mrss)

## **Cotton-picking students face shortages of water and food**

11.09.2012

Students from the Tashkent-based Uzbek State University of World Languages who have been called up to pick cotton in Jizak Region are complaining about living conditions in cotton fields.

Most young men (young women were exempt from picking cotton) who were sent to the Navbahor farm in Jizak Region's Pahtakor District on 3 September complained that they did not have beds or proper food or safe drinking water.

They told Uznews.net that each room, which was quickly converted at a nursery housed 20 cotton pickers. Only few of them have folding beds, so most are sleeping on the dirty and cold floor.

Fourteen hours in the field

"We are woken up at 5 o'clock in the morning, when it is still cold," a journalism student said. "And quickly having drunk boiled water and eaten what we have to run to the cotton field and work there until 7 o'clock in the evening."

Students complained that they were forced to work 14 or 15 hours a day for 150 sums per each kilo of cotton picked (about \$0.05), with a daily target at 50 kg of cotton.

Only few manage to fulfil the target, while most pick only between 15 and 25 kg a day, even though

their supervisors keep frightening them that they would be expelled from university for failing to meet the target.

The problem with meeting the daily target benefits local residents who offer their services to students for 10,000 sums a day (200 sums per each kilo of cotton picked).

Only after their constant complaints, students said, they are now supplied with drinking water regularly.

Instead of schoolchildren Students were called up to cotton field in Uzbekistan this year from the very beginning of September.

For the first time since the country obtained its independence, the local media report, workers from state-run media outlets, nurseries, post offices and other establishments were called up to pick cotton.

Observers say that this situation has developed in the country because the cotton-harvesting campaign is being held for the first time without slave labour of schoolchildren who are now free of annual servitude after the government adopted a resolution.

[http://www.uznews.net/news\\_single.php?lng=en&sub=usual&cid=3&nid=20751](http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=en&sub=usual&cid=3&nid=20751)

## **Uzbek teachers sent to cotton fields**

12.09.12

In many colleges, lyceums and universities in Uzbekistan classes have been reduced because most teachers have been sent to pick cotton.

At the Tashkent law college students have two classes a day instead of the usual four because all male teachers and some female teachers have been sent to cotton fields.

They say colleges and universities in Tashkent will go back to their usual work pattern no earlier than mid-October.

"No one cares how late and at what pace, children will be catching up with the missed [programme] and how they will sit exams. The government seems not to need qualified specialists but qualified agricultural workers," a teacher said.

A similar situation developed in most secondary vocational and higher educational establishments in Tashkent.

### **Students to cotton fields!**

Tashkent-based students were also called up to pick cotton this year. Even before the start of the academic year college, lyceum and university administrations required third-year students over 18 to submit a written undertaking to go to pick cotton "voluntarily".

These written undertakings included a provision that students would not complain about picking cotton to the authorities. Those who violate provisions of these undertakings would face expulsion.

"I am afraid those who refuse to go to cotton fields may easily be expelled for breach of discipline or poor academic performance. Student cotton picking is a campaign backed by the state at the highest level so no complaint would help," the father of a student from the Tashkent Chemical Technology Institute said.

### **Not to be cotton slave?**

An anonymous official from the Tashkent Railway Institute said that students could refuse to pick cotton if they only were a little bolder in defending their rights and did not fear pressure from the university administration.

"It is illegal to distract students from studies and send them to cotton fields. Firstly, they should not sign written undertakings agreeing to go to cotton fields; secondly, they should not fear to complain to the Education Ministry and prosecutor's office," he said.

He said the prosecutor's office could not ignore the complaint, especially if it was signed by many students.

He also thinks that they should not be worried about teachers' and university administration's revenge either.

"On the contrary, such students will be respected for ability and bravery to fight for their rights and even fear them," he said.

Not only fee-paying students can demand rights but also students studying on government grants because they have grounds to require quality education instead of forced labour, the teacher believes.

"Their main argument should be that they were more talented and capable based on entrance exams and the government spends huge sums for their education. Budget funds should not be wasted," he said.

[http://www.uznews.net/news\\_single.php?lng=en&sub=hot&cid=2&nid=20777](http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=en&sub=hot&cid=2&nid=20777)

## **Businesses forced to sponsor cotton harvesting in Angren**

12.09.2012

Taxmen are handing out copies of an appeal by members of the local legislature to provide financial support to cotton pickers in Angren in Tashkent Region.

The campaign among shopkeepers has been underway for three days now.

The appeal says that on 27 July a sitting of the Council of People's Deputies of Angren adopted the appeal calling for support to cotton pickers.

Shopkeepers are asked to help students of the Tashkent Region Pedagogical Institute, academic lyceums and colleges who are in cotton fields now.

Deputies asked for support in form of foodstuffs or any other form and indicated in an appeal the number of an account in Ipoteka Bank to which businessmen could send money.

The appeal stresses that the campaign is voluntary, but taxmen threaten to complicate the lives of shopkeepers if they refuse to provide aid which, taxmen suggest, should range between 200,000 and 300,000 sums.

"Taxmen told us last year that we should either pick cotton ourselves or donate 50,000 sums," an entrepreneur called Ilhom said. "We gave money without receipts and we do not know how the money was spent."

His neighbour Marvarid said that this time the levy was four to six times more and it was being done in a modern manner when they transfer money to a bank account rather than give it to a taxman.

Businessmen are afraid of refusing to send "voluntary" aid, as goods were seized from those who refused it last year.

As a result, almost all entrepreneurs agreed to transfer money even though copies of the appeal bear a stamp of the Council of People's Deputies and are not signed by its chairman Abdulla Yunusov despite the fact that his name is indicated on the appeal.

Yunusov is also acting as Angren's mayor. It seems that no-one will take responsibility for the money.

[http://www.uznews.net/news\\_single.php?lng=en&sub=hot&cid=2&nid=20776](http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=en&sub=hot&cid=2&nid=20776)

## **In Fergana imams also were sent to pick cotton**

13.09.2012

When we called to “Zayd ibn Sobit” mosque in Bagdad district of Fergana a security guard answered and said that all the mosque people are in the fields, picking cotton.

- This year, the harvest is very strict, that’s why mosques were also sent to pick cotton. Our main imam (religious priest) is also in the field,- says one of the priests of the mosque who spoke with the Radio Liberty off the record.

According to what he said, imams are taking turns in serving both in the cotton field and in the mosque.

“Zayd inb Sobit” mosque is not only popular in the district, but also is one of the famous mosques in the region. It is because of the talented imam Sohijjom Akhmedov, who is 31 years old and very literate in reciting Koran.

This imam received a respected third place in completion for the “Imam of the year 2012”. We found imam Sohijjon Akhmedov in the cotton field. But Sohijjon Akhmedov, who answered the phone, apologized and declined to give an interview to the Radio Liberty after he consulted with his supervisors.

Imams are going out of their ways to mobilize people for the cotton harvest. In other words, they are preaching to help with the harvest of the crop without wasting it and are reciting examples from Koran and Khadith, and quoting the President regarding farming.

It has also been reported that these types of preaching lectures are given not only in Bagdad district or across Fergana region, but also, many other imams across the country were tasked to do the same in their mosques.

One of the Muslims who pray in this mosque from Fergana spoke with the Radio Liberty off the record.

“Whichever mosque you go during the preaching you hear at least 3-4 times things like “thanks to our independence” or “due to the President’s efforts”. Now imams are preaching about not to waste the cotton crop. When winter comes and gets cold and the electricity will be cut off, then they will preach about being patient”,- says the man from Fergana.

According to the data report taken from the Office of Muslims in Uzbekistan, there are nearly 2050 officially registered active mosques across the country at the moment.

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24707541.html>

## **Uzbek scientists invented a new cotton harvesting machine**

14.09.2012

In Uzbekistan teachers, medics and reportedly even religious clerks are also mobilised to attend in cotton harvest. Scientists of the Mechanical Institute of Science Academy have announced that they have invented a new cotton harvesting machine.

According to them, the machine stands out with its construction, simplicity and the cost effectiveness. In the last years of the Soviet period, half of cotton produced in Uzbekistan was harvested by combine machines. However, these combine machines completely disappeared during the years of Independence and “selhoztehnika” unions (agricultural technical equipment) in farming areas were ruined.

One of the inventors of the new cotton harvesting machine and senior researchers in the Mechanical Institute Abdurakhim Yuldashev said in an interview with the BBC that it is very important to mechanize the agriculture in the country. According to him, in the last few years the Uzbek government started to pay attention to these issues again and even spared government grants for new technical projects. According to the inventor, more than 100 old model cotton harvesting machines produced in Uzbekistan have been taken to operate in the cotton fields.

He also said that newly invented cotton harvesting machine needs 1 ton less metal and its production cost is 20 per cent cheaper.

In mid 1990s Uzbekistan bought “Case” cotton harvesting machines from the United States. Abdurakhim Yuldashev says that the cotton harvesting machines from America picked more cotton but the quality was poor.

And in his opinion, agricultural technical equipment from the Soviet era is old now and there is a big need for new and modern equipment.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/uzbekistan/2012/09/120914\\_cy\\_cotton\\_machinery.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/uzbekistan/2012/09/120914_cy_cotton_machinery.shtml)

### **UGF local monitors from Tashkent report:**

- Tashkent. Owners of private shops in Tashkent Katartal market are forced to go to pick cotton. Many of the businessmen are hiring workers for \$200, who are expected to work for 10-15 days in the fields for their place.

- Kashkadarya. Police, neighbourhood committee and college representatives are visiting families and are trying to convince parents to send their children to pick cotton. If parents do not wish to send their children, they are forced to write an explanatory letter. The first group of school teachers has already gone to desert areas to pick cotton. It has been made obligatory to send 60 per cent of the teachers to pick cotton and the remaining 40 per cent have to teach their classes.

Across the country, staff members of government funded jobs are forced to go to pick cotton. The refusal may lead to the dismissal of the employee. A mother of a medical staff from one of the hospitals in Tashkent, who is forced to pick cotton in Djizzakh region since 2 September, tells:

“My son together with other medical workers was placed in a kindergarten building. This kindergarten was abandoned a long time ago. It doesn't have any windows. People sleep on the concrete floor, there is no basic living conditions. They are badly fed, but the biggest problem is the drinking water. My son caught a cold and lost weight severely. It is very strange but they are raised at 5am in the morning and taken to the fields at 5:30 am. They work for 16- 17 hours a day. Whoever cannot pick 50 kilo norm is forced to work for 19 hours. Medics have to walk to the fields, which are 7-10 km away from the place where they live and it exhausts people. The head doctor of the hospital, where my son works says that there is no one to replace him and that he is young and can endure all 30 days”.

### **Once again Uzbek government denied access to ILO monitoring experts**

The Uzbek government has refused the request of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) experts to conduct monitoring on child labour issues in this year's cotton harvest season in the country.

Despite the Uzbek government's insistence on not using child labour in cotton harvesting, they still declined the ILO request on expert monitoring of this very issue in the country again in this year's harvest season.

On Monday the Cotton Campaign organization in Washington issued a statement on this issue based on their sources.

- According to the reports our organization received, Uzbekistan this year again declined the request by the International Labour Organisation on conducting expert monitoring of child labour issues in the country. If the Uzbek government indeed does not want to involve children to work in the fields,

they should allow the ILO expert group to come and monitor the situation,- said Mathew Fisher Dali the representative of Cotton Campaign in Washington.

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24704446.html>

## **Official in Tashkent has been denying requests for access by the ILO experts to Uzbekistan**

11.09.2012

The ILO has not yet commented on this matter.

At the same time, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of People of Uzbekistan officials declared that the child labour is not allowed in the country in this year's harvest season and the ones who let it happen will be strictly punished.

- This year we received very strict instructions from higher authorities on not to send children to pick cotton. Seminars were held all across the country. There were explanatory sessions on government's ratification of international conventions,- said Umar Sultonov the spokesperson of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of People

According to the representative of the Ministry, this year the situation will be monitored in all the regions of the country by the government and non- government foreign organizations including the UNICEF experts.

But human rights activists claim that the UNICEF observers cannot replace real monitoring by experts. Besides, despite the promises of the Uzbek officials, it was observed that in some places children were forcefully involved in cotton harvesting in last year's season.

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24704446.html11.09.2012>

## **A new UGF production including current images of this years cotton harvest:**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hI-37AzXwGM&feature=youtu.be>

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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/cccac/events/cotton-sector-in-central-asia-2005/file49842.pdf>

Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights, 2011: <http://www.uzbekgermanforum.org>