

A CHRONICLE OF FORCED LABOUR OF CHILDREN AND ADULTS HARVEST UPDATES FROM UZBEKISTAN

Issue 5, October 16, 2012



Clinic of Sayhonobod district, “ All went to the cotton”

This chronicle aims to provide fresh evidence of the on-going practice of forced labour of adults, youth, and children in Uzbekistan’s cotton industry. Uzbekistan is one of the largest cotton producers and exporters in the world.

(Apologies for cross-posting if any. Please let us know if you do not wish to continue to receive these reports).

Harvest updates – UGF local monitors report:

- In village areas of the Kashkadarya region, teachers are teaching classes for only two hours on Fridays and Saturdays, and then all of the teachers have to go to pick cotton. Earlier in this year’s harvest, 8th and 9th grade children, ages 14-15, were sent to pick cotton on weekends,
- In Yakkabog district of Kashkadarya region, children from 5th to 9th grade, ages 11-15, are being sent to pick cotton. In this district, at least 3 schools are known to be sending children to pick cotton.
- In districts of Andijan region, schools are stopping Saturday classes, and on weekends teachers, school security guards, maintenance staff and others are all taken to the fields to pick cotton.
- On 3 September in Arnasay district of Djizzakh region, the 4th-year cadet of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Academy died in cotton field. According to local people, the cadet wanted to steal a trailer of cotton from a tractor that was pulling three trailers full of cotton. It was dark, and the boy jumped to the second carriage, fell under the wheels of the third carriage, and was crushed. The next morning all cadets of the Academy were returned back to Tashkent“.
- Supervision of the college students (16- 18 year olds) who are picking cotton and living in cotton fields has intensified. Parents who have visited their children in the fields report that they have been warned that it is prohibited to take a picture of the barracks where students are staying. A supervisor at each cotton field has been ordered to call the police if any person is taking photos or video.
- For a week, 8 - 15 October, all schools in the city of Angren closed for early „vacation“, because all teaching staff were sent to pick cotton. The school reportedly plans to make up the missed days in the classroom during the nationally scheduled fall vacation, 4 - 10 November. Teachers who did not want to pick cotton had to pay 400 000 Som (about \$ 150 U.S.) or directly hire someone to pick their quota of cotton. If the teacher paid or hired collector, he had to work in the school.

Student from Djizzakh died in the cotton field

05.10.2012

18 Year old Aziz Bakhtiyorov the second year student of Djizzakh city Art College died of a heart attack while he was picking cotton, in Dustlik district of Djizzakh region.

The incident happened on 30 September and was kept quiet until 5 October, when an anonymous source close to the incident reported it to *Radio Liberty* on.

This year students from the Djizzakh College of Art were brought to Oybek collective farm in Dustlik district. On 30 September, the student Aziz Bakhtiyorov died in the field. Young Aziz collapsed while picking cotton. He was taken to Dustlik district hospital, where his body was examined in the morgue and the cause of his death determined to be a heart attack.

According to the local source, a nurse who supervises the health of students was present at the cotton field at the time of the heart attack but could not have done anything to help him.

Radio Liberty got in touch with the head of Djizzakh region health department Polat Boboev. He confirmed Aziz Bakhtiyorov's death in cotton field. Mr. Boboev said, "Yes such incident indeed happened. The body of the boy was medically examined. You can come and learn the results of the examination."

Article on *Radio Liberty*:

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24730268.html>

"We bow to you" cotton grower "teachers!"

1.10.2012

16 years ago when Islam Karimov declared the 1st of October National Teachers' Day, teachers spent that day in the fields picking cotton. This year too, 60 per cent of all school teachers nationwide have been sent to pick cotton.

Those 40 per cent teachers who stay back to keep teaching classes at the schools are also sent to help out with harvest on their "days off" for public holidays.

In the meantime anonymous staff member of Samarkand region National Department of Education said that "teachers went to pick cotton with their own initiative wanting to help farmers with the harvest".

However, teachers offer a different perspective. A teacher from Djizzakh explained the mobilisation in Djizzakh region.

"Our school received an order from mayor's office. Then on Saturday, Sunday and Monday everybody went to pick cotton. Some teachers in our school paid 14 thousand soms to stay back from the harvest", said the teacher to *Radio Liberty*.

According to journalist Sharof Ubaydullaev, "this year in Uzbekistan nearly 600 thousand children didn't go to pick cotton and it is a revolutionary change, I believe it will be kept like this till the end of the season."

There are around 10 thousand secondary education schools in Uzbekistan.

According to reports received from teachers, since school children are not participating in harvesting, 60 per cent of teachers were ordered to replace them in cotton fields.

Article on *Radio Liberty*:

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24725030.html>

Saturday and Sunday all the others who stayed back will go to pick cotton!

30.09.2012

Employees of private businesses around the country were massively sent to pick cotton on Saturday and Sunday.

According to *Radio Liberty* listeners from Andijan and Djizzakh regions, those who did not want to pick cotton had to pay cash instead.

A teacher from Djizzakh told the radio station that the few teachers who did not go to pick cotton and continued teaching classes had to pay 14 thousand soms in order to stay at work.

“Almost everybody paid in our school. We collected 14 thousand soms per person. In other schools too some people gave money, others went for two days to pick cotton”, said the teacher, who spoke with *Radio Liberty*.

Other governmental organisations such as banks, administrations, and hospitals also had to send their staff members to pick cotton on the weekend.

“But they didn’t touch the school children yet. Children attended classes until Saturday afternoon. Only classes on Saturday were shortened”, said one teacher from Djizzakh.

At the moment 60 per cent of teachers are being mobilised to pick cotton, some staying overnight in barracks near the fields. The remaining 40 per cent of teachers have to teach all the classes, which means that sometimes they have to combine 2-3 classes into large groups in order to cover the curriculum.

A *Radio Liberty* listener who called from Andijan said that even private businessmen were sent to pick cotton. He also said that the norm was assigned as 60 kilo per day.

Article on *Radio Liberty*:

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24724572.html>

Traffic police is sending drivers off to cotton

28.09.2012

A driver, who asked to go by the name Narimon and lives in Urtachirchiq district of Tashkent region, says that it has become hard to go to Toytepa city.

“Traffic police is demanding a confirmation letter from drivers who go to the district centre about their attendance in cotton harvest,” reported the driver.

According to Narimon, mini bus cars which go from Urtachirchiq district to Tashkent Koylik market received such orders too.

“In the morning police officers come and take drivers licences or their number plates and ask them to go to pick cotton and bring stamped confirmation letter from farmers that they picked 100 kilo cotton,” says Narimon.

In Uzbekistan during the cotton harvest season, even the traffic police is mobilised to pick cotton. With the order of local authorities, police officers also strictly control the main roads to city centres, to keep the roads free from traffic.

Retired Bakhodir Kamolov who lives in Pop district of Namangan region says that from 6 am till 5pm cars are not allowed freely into the city.

Article on *Radio Liberty*:

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24723007.html>

Nurse: "We picked a lot of cotton, they didn't pay us anything. That's a pity"

4.10.2012

Media service of the Ministry of National Education of Uzbekistan issued a statement saying that “the reports of some foreign media reports on involvement of school children in Uzbekistan in cotton harvest are far from reality”.

The decree of Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoev prohibits taking school children to pick cotton. However many observers are reporting that this year adults are under high pressure. The BBC interviewed Malvina, a nurse from Tashkent and listened to her story:

Malvina: „Our clinic is participating in harvest for the second year. According to the orders of local authorities, every organisation should participate in cotton harvest. A month ago we were told that we have to go to pick cotton. But they didn't tell us who exactly is going.“

BBC: „Did they tell you what to bring with you when they informed you when to go to cotton?“

Malvina: „Blankets, duvets, warm clothes, working tools and of course food. As for living conditions, there was no water. Generally there were a lot of issues with drinking water. They'd bring two bottles of water to the field, it wasn't even boiled. But we had no choice, we drank it, when thirsty you are ready to drink anything.“

BBC: „How was the living condition?“

Malvina: “In the beginning they accommodated us in district centre school. We were 330 people all together. That's why there wasn't enough space for everyone. 24 people from our clinic didn't get accommodation. They gave us some space not far from the building, but that place was very cold. We had to sleep on the floor using the blankets we brought with us. It was very hard, and once we couldn't tolerate it anymore we looked for a place to rent in local houses, but the rent was very expensive.“

BBC: “What was the agenda of the day?“

Malvina: “They would wake us early 4am in the morning. They gave us half an hour to get ready. Then we would have to walk to the field for one, one and a half hour. The daily plan was assigned as 60 kilo per day. Around 1 o'clock in the afternoon they would bring us lunch, sometimes they would bring it late. After the lunch we would continue to pick cotton, around 5 o'clock in the evening we would submit the cotton we picked. We finished the work at around 6 pm.”

BBC: “It must be difficult to pick 60 kilo of cotton. What would happen if you couldn't pick this amount?“

Malvina: “We would buy the remaining amount from the villagers. For example, if we could pick 35-40 kilo cotton, we would buy the rest from the village people. And then we would chat with each other or call our colleagues who stayed at work and spend the rest of the day like that.“

BBC: “Do you get tired by the end of the day? What were you doing in the evenings?“

Malvina: “We would try to take a bath when we came back from the field. It wasn't easy to organise it. But we found out that one of the local houses in the area had a sauna bath. We paid 2 thousand soms to use his bath facilities. This money is only a dollar, but it is a big money for us. Besides, we were paying for many other things. For example, we were buying 2 litres of water for 500 soms.“

BBC: “If medical personnel like you were all taken to pick cotton, did it get harder to provide help to ill people?“

Malvina: “330 medical staff were supposed to go to pick cotton from each districts. I don't have any information on what difficulties people in hospitals are facing... but there was a surgeon who came with us to pick cotton. People call him and ask, “you checked me last week, I have a high temperature. What should I do?“ The surgeon would tell them that he is in cotton field that they should go to hospital.“

BBC: “How do you feel about the way they involved you in cotton harvest?“

Malvina: “Of course I am angry. I’m reaching my 50th birthday. I have asthma. But when we gathered in the office and consulted who would be sent to pick cotton, we found out that everyone else had some kind of illness. Someone has high blood pressure; another one has a backache... The head of the clinic saw the list of illnesses and told us to stop and apart from pregnant women and women with young toddlers everyone would go to pick cotton. Or you would be fired.”

BBC: “Cotton is very important product for the economy of Uzbekistan; it is one of the ways of bringing money in to the budget. Did you feel part of this important process?”

Malvina: „Of course...we picked a lot of cotton with our hands. But no one paid us for our work, it’s a shame. Our clinic signed a contract with this cotton farm for five years. It is for sure that we will come to pick cotton next year too.“

Article on *BBC*:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/uzbekistan/2012/10/121004_cy_nurse_cotton.shtml

Pupils from Ishtikhon returned from cotton back to school

Media spokesperson of the Ministry of National Education of Uzbekistan overrode the report published by *Radio Liberty* on 29 September about schoolchildren of Ishtikhon schools who were sent to pick cotton:

“Anonymous report given by some foreign mass media on involvement of school children in Ishtikhon district of Samarkand region in cotton harvest was inspected by staff members of National education departments in district and region. Facts given in that report do not match the reality”, says the statement distributed by the media service of the Uzbek National Education Ministry.

After this overriding statement *Radio Liberty* got in touch with its sources in Ishtikhon district. One of the school teachers said that after this report was broadcasted on the radio, school children were immediately returned back to school:

“They started investigating after the Saturday broadcast. From Monday all children were back to classes. Higher grade children picked cotton for about a week and 5-6th grade children picked for 3 days. Children didn’t pick cotton in the fields close to the main roads, they were farther inside,” said the school teacher, who asked to remain anonymous.

He also said that the missed classes during that week were recorded as completed in school registries later.

A primary school teacher in Ishtikhon district village school also confirmed that last week higher grade children were sent to pick cotton:

“We primary schools didn’t go to pick cotton, but last week they closed the school for the higher grade children to pick cotton. But from today the classes started again,” said the teacher.

Another school teacher from Ishtikhon district said that higher grade school children all picked cotton for three full days:

“For three days 8th and 9th grade pupils picked cotton. It happened on 27th, 28th and 29th September. Lower grades didn’t go. It happened in all the schools of the district,” said the teacher.

Radio Liberty contacted many other schools in Ishtikhon district. According to the teachers who spoke with *Radio Liberty*, since Monday all the classes have been taking place fully in most of the schools.

According to one of the teachers, the mayor of Ishtikhon district Sukhrat Nematov called the directors of schools and verbally ordered them to send higher grade children to pick cotton.

At the moment it is unknown whether the district mayor had been advised by the regional and state authorities or decided on his own to send children off to the fields.

Article on *Radio Liberty*:
<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24728682.html>
10.10.2012

Unwilling cotton harvesters in Uzbekistan

13.10.2012

Uzbekistan's cotton harvest is in full swing, and as in every other year the authorities are pressing students and public-sector workers into service as farm labour.

The Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan held a small demonstration in the capital Tashkent on October 9, demanding an end to the exploitation of minors. The group monitors the use of forced labour during the harvest.

There seems to be a change for the better this year – 15 to 18 year olds are still being sent out into the fields instead of much younger children.

“They used to bring in children of ten and over to work in the fields, but now they are between 15 and 18, mostly college and high school students,” the Alliance's head Yelena Urlaeva said. “The authorities have raised the age, but the pattern of forced labour still applies.”

Under international pressure to end the use of child labour on a mass scale, and subject to a boycott of Uzbek cotton, the government has repeatedly denied the practice exists.

The Human Rights Alliance has identified high schools and colleges where students have been required to go and pick cotton.

“Many children fall ill, they are tired out by the hours of heavy labour, and they lack medical help, decent meals and accommodation,” a statement from Urlaeva's group said.

The teenagers are given a quota of 60 kilograms of cotton a day. The government maintains its monopoly control over cotton purchases from farmers, and this year it doubled the rate set for paying pickers to 200 soms (around eight US cents) per kilogram.

If a school pupil or student has the money, they can pay some needy adult to do their work for them, at roughly nine dollars a day.

As well as adolescents, adults are dispatched to the fields. Employees of public-sector organisations have to go en masse, and private businesses are pressured into sending up to 15 per cent of their staff. The “mahallas”, the lowest tier of local government, are under instructions to send people who are receiving state benefits.

A teacher in Syrdarya province in central Uzbekistan said all the staff at his school had to go and pick cotton. The school head offered one alternative – paying a fine of 400,000 soms, about 160 dollars, as a form of compensation for not working on the harvest.

“That's more than a month's wages for me, so I have to go and pick cotton,” the teacher said. “There's no one in the school, and no classes are running anyway.”

This article was produced as part of IWPR's News Briefing CentralAsia output, funded by the National Endowment for Democracy.

If you would like to comment or ask a question about this story, please contact our Central Asia editorial team at feedback.ca@iwpr.net.

Article on *IWPR*:
<http://iwpr.net/report-news/unwilling-cotton-harvesters-uzbekistan>

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>