

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

Issue 7, November 20, 2012



Girl picking cotton next to defoliation tractor, October 2012

With this issue we conclude our chronicle of forced labour of children and adults in Uzbekistan's cotton fields during the 2012 harvest. The cotton harvest is over and we can make some preliminary conclusions.

This year the cotton harvest was different than in previous years. For the first time, children under the age of 16 were not massively mobilized to pick cotton. However, the system of forcing people to pick cotton under duress remained exactly the same. The government attempted to allay pressure to reform its cotton sector by keeping more schools open and demographically shifting the burden of the forced labour system from younger children to older children and adults. In doing so, the government signalled that more significant pressure is required to end forced labour of children and adults in the cotton sector

The government compensated the less comprehensive mobilization of young children labour by forcing more older children and adults to pick cotton. As a result, the mass,

forced mobilisation of people to harvest cotton was much more intense than in previous years.

High school students, ages 16 to 18, were taken to pick cotton from 5th of September and remained in the fields until the end of October. Younger school children, ages 10-15, were taken to pick cotton sporadically throughout the harvest, including in Samarkand, Jizzak, Kashkadarya and Andijon.

Cotton harvest, as usual, negatively influenced the quality of education in schools and colleges. Teachers were seen as free work force and massively involved in cotton farming. Even though schools stayed open, classes were cut back or postponed as a result of the lack of teachers available. Similarly impacted, hospitals had to turn away people in need, because doctors and nurses were in the cotton fields.

The children from 16 and up had to work in a mass order without the right to refuse, under fear of being subject to humiliation and punishment, including expulsion from school, and while living under terrible conditions.

More than any previous harvest, the majority of workers received no wages, and the government forced people to subsidize the cotton campaign with their own personal finances.

Ironically, the pressure on the adult population was so noticeable this year, that some people regretted the government effort to reduce mass mobilization of the younger children during the cotton harvest.

Since 2009, the Uzbek government continues to refuse access to the ILO to visit the country to conduct an independent assessment during the cotton season. Additionally, the government of Uzbekistan continued to harass, intimidate and repress citizens who attempt to monitor the 2012 cotton harvest, and farms were under surveillance by police.

A student who didn't go pick cotton will be expelled from university

01.11.2012

Radio Liberty was informed about a student being expelled from Tashkent State University for not having gone to pick cotton.

According to an anonymous fellow student, the dean of the university also prepared an order to deprive students who didn't go to pick cotton of their 3-month stipend by adding them to a list of students who owed the administration tuition during the cotton harvest.

- "Until now, I always used to give some money to my course leader in order to avoid having to pick cotton. But this year, he wanted 300 US dollars. So, I didn't give the money, nor did I go to pick cotton. But since the cotton season is now over and everyone is back at school studying, teachers have been humiliating me with offensive words. Now my 3-month stipend will be deducted for not going to pick cotton".

A university official told Radio Liberty that students who skipped the cotton harvest without reason would be expelled, not only deprived of the stipend. The order has already been prepared.

"Here cotton means practical activity. If a student doesn't go to pick cotton, she/he will be expelled from university," said the university official.

Radio Liberty: “In what way can picking cotton from morning till evening be a ‘practical activity’?”

Official: “Students go during cotton cultivation and any other work related to cotton production. This is not the first year. Ever since university was established, this activity has been taking place. And it will continue in future. If they wouldn’t go to pick cotton, they have to give a reason”.

Radio Liberty: “There should be a difference between practical activity and forced labour, can you please explain the logic here?”

Official: “This is politics. This year you have seen that not only students, but also all the hospitals and clinics, the entire town went to pick cotton. Teachers begged students to go and finish it up quickly. Now I don’t know how to answer your question if this is politics...”

Radio Liberty: “So does that mean that students who didn’t attend the ‘practical activity’ will be expelled from studying?”

Official: “Here we are talking only about those who didn’t go and don’t have a valid reason. Let’s say a student stays and commits a crime. Tomorrow the prosecutor comes and asks why he didn’t go to pick cotton, and why we left him unattended. If he asks why we went against the government, who will answer to that? That’s why everyone should go to pick cotton, if there is a valid excuse, *i.e.* health reason, they should submit a medical certificate”, said the teacher from Tashkent Agriculture University who wanted to remain anonymous.

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24757842.html>

Runaway students from Kokand were caught on the border

30.10.2012

Four students of Kokand State Pedagogical University who were assigned to pick cotton in the Furkat district of Ferghana region were caught on the Tajik border while they were on the run.

A source, who reported this to Radio Liberty, said that these 4 runaway cotton pickers were 1st-year students from Kokand Pedagogical University.

“As the number of higher-year students, who paid money in order to stay at university was high, the main burden was laid on first-year students’ shoulders. So four of those students, exhausted from the heavy work load, attempted to escape the cotton fields on 11th of October and, without anyone noticing, they crossed the border to Tajikistan and were caught by Tajik border guards,” said the source.

Students of Kokand Pedagogical University have been picking cotton in the fields in Ferghana region, which are close to the Tajik border.

<http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24755460.html>

Why was the house of a journalist and human rights activist in Tashkent searched?

7.11.2012

According to the officials, who introduced themselves as representatives of Tashkent city Uchtepa District Court Department and had visited Malokhat Eshonkulova’s house, they had come to collect a penalty fee charged by the court earlier this year.

However, Malokhat Eshonkulova believes that the purpose of this raid was to get rid of evidence she had recently been collecting on the use of child labour in the cotton fields and the current situation in the country.

After Uzbek government officials announced that the yearly cotton harvest quota was fulfilled for the season, Malokhat Eshonkulova and the head of the Uzbek Human Rights Defenders Alliance Elena Urlaeva examined the situation of forced child labour in the specific regions.

Malokhat Eshonkulova investigated the situation in the Kashkadarya, Samarkand and Djizzakh regions.

She videotaped and took photos of schoolchildren in the Kashkadarya district, who were continuing to pick cotton during school hours even after that official statement had been made to prohibit child labour in the cotton fields.

The BBC published these photos taken by Malokhat Eshonkulova on their website.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/uzbekistan/2012/10/121023_uzbek_children_eshonkulova.shtml

“The court executives, who allegedly came to collect the charged penalty, were only interested in my portable USB disks”, said Malokhat Eshonkulova.

These portable USB disks contained all the data she collected in the above-mentioned regions.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/uzbekistan/2012/11/121107_uzbek_journalists_house_serched.shtml

*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>