

Review of the 2012 Cotton Harvest in Uzbekistan
By
Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights
Cotton Campaign



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Table of Contents:

I.	A Demographic Shift, but No Progress.....	Page 3
II.	Reduction in the closure of primary schools yet.....	Pages 4-5
	continuation of state-sponsored forced child labor	
A.	<i>Forced labor of young children (ages 10-14)</i>	
B.	<i>Forced labor of older children (ages 15-17)</i>	
III.	Intensified forced labor of adults.....	Pages 5-9
A.	<i>University students</i>	
B.	<i>Government employees</i>	
C.	<i>Private Sector: Domestic and Multinational Companies</i>	
D.	<i>Lower-income citizens</i>	
IV.	Increase in deaths in the cotton fields.....	Pages 9-10
V.	Increased corruption.....	Page 10
VI.	No Independent Monitoring.....	Page 11
VII.	Preliminary conclusions.....	Pages 11-12

This report is based on information gathered by human rights defenders within Uzbekistan during the 2012 cotton harvest, from August through November 2012, and authored by the Cotton Campaign and Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights.

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The Uzbek – German Forum for Human Rights (UGF) is a German based NGO aimed at improving the human rights situation in Uzbekistan and strengthening and promoting civil society, and a participant in the Cotton Campaign. For more information, contact: Umida Niyazova, Director, UGF, <http://uzbekgermanforum.org/contact/>.



The Cotton Campaign is the global coalition of worker, employer, investor and human rights organizations coalesced to build political will in the government of Uzbekistan to end forced labor of adults and children in its cotton sector. For more information, contact:

Email: cottoncampaigncoordinator@gmail.com,

Website www.CottonCampaign.org Twitter @CottonCampaign

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I. A Demographic Shift, but No Progress

The 2012 cotton harvest in Uzbekistan has concluded, and observers in Uzbekistan revealed that while there was no nationwide mobilization of younger children as in years past, there were a number of disturbing trends:

- continued forced child labor despite a demographic shift of the burden to older children,
- intensified forced labor of adults,
- continued rejection of independent monitoring,
- harassment of Uzbek citizens who attempted to monitor, and
- increased extraction of financial and other resources from Uzbek citizens by government authorities.

The system of forced labor of cotton production remained the same in 2012 as in previous years; implementation of the system was carried out with a demographic shift to older children and more adults, accompanied with an unprecedented scale of corruption.



“Everyone went to cotton”
read the sign in this village of the
Surkhandarya region

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II. Reduction in the closure of primary schools yet continuation of state-sponsored forced child labor

A significant factor that differentiated the 2012 cotton harvest from previous years was the reduction in state-sponsored forced labor of children under the age of 15. In July, Uzbekistan’s Prime Minister issued verbal orders that schoolchildren were not to be sent to pick cotton, a statement that merely reiterated the existing national law that prohibits child labor. Similar statements were issued in previous years, but they were never fulfilled in practice. This year, the statement had an effect: for the first time in many years, the majority of schools for children under age 15 were not closed, and therefore the young children were not forced en masse by government authorities to pick cotton. During the harvest, most schools remained open. Unfortunately, sporadic forced labor of children under age 16 occurred, and the state-sponsored forced labor system was fully employed.

A. Forced labor of young children (ages 10-14)

In some regions of Uzbekistan, schoolchildren between the ages of 10 and 14 were sent to pick cotton for a few days, usually after school, but in some places during school hours. It is difficult to judge the scale of the use of forced labor of these younger children throughout the country, because the government has prevented independent monitoring. According to reliable information from the UGF network of civil-society observers of the harvest, at least three schools in the Kashkadaryo region sent their schoolchildren out to pick cotton. In another district, in the Andijon region, at least two schools

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were shuttered for one month, from the end of September, to send children from the fifth grade and up with their teachers to the cotton fields. In Tashkent and Samarkand regions, schools sent children for a couple days at a time to the fields. Initial indications suggest that these instances of schools mobilizing schoolchildren during the 2012 harvest were the initiatives of local government authorities. When information of schoolchildren under age 15 was reported to authorities by journalists and human rights defenders, government authorities reacted.

In several regions, parents themselves took their children to pick cotton. In rural areas, where the unemployment rate is high, and where incomes are very low, the 2012 cotton harvest presented a new way to earn cash: pick cotton and sell it to higher-income residents who were obliged by the government to deliver a personal quota of cotton picked and preferred to pay someone else to do the field work. Therefore, rural residents picked cotton as a family, together with their children. It was possible to sell the cotton at high rates to the desperate residents of other parts of the country.

B. Forced labor of older children (ages 15-17)

The scale of coercive mobilization of high school students increased compared to previous harvests. These older children, typically ages 15-17, were forced en masse to pick cotton during the 2012 cotton harvest, thereby continuing nationwide forced child labor. Starting September 5, 2012, older children (ages 15-17) were sent to the cotton fields across the country, under threat of expulsion from school.



While they were theoretically paid, the cost of their meals was deducted from their earnings. As a result, while students had to pick 60 kilograms per day, they only received payment for 25 kg. In practice, this meant that for a 10-12 hour work day, a half-starved 15-year old earned approximately 20 cents (USD).

These older children lived under appalling conditions. During the harvest they stayed in sport halls of local schools, in village cinemas, and in the meeting halls of administrative buildings. They

slept on the floor, lacked adequate potable water, food and hygienic sanitation facilities. Sadly, there were also many incidents of students beaten by public authorities for failing to meet their quotas.

III. Intensified forced labor of adults

During the 2012 cotton harvest, the government shifted a significant share of the burden of the cotton harvest to citizens over the age of 18, by forcing greater numbers of university students, government employees, private sector businessmen, and low-income residents to contribute to the harvest, under threats to their livelihoods.

A. University students

Starting in early September, all university students were forced to work the 2012 cotton harvest, under threat of expulsion from school. As a university official commented to Radio Liberty, “If a student doesn’t go to pick cotton, she/he will be expelled from university.” University did not even open until the harvest was concluded, and conditions in the fields and accommodations were the same as the high school students’: unsafe, unsanitary, and undernourished. Groups of students fled the fields toward the end of their second month working 10-12 hour days in the fields and enduring startling physical abuse, and wandered home on their own.

“Should we let them loose instead of being strict with them? We only have one demand, to pick cotton and fulfill targets assigned by the mayor of the region, which is 60 kilo per day. We don’t ask for anything else. We might have slapped one or two times when they misbehaved.” – Deputy Rector, Termiz State University, interviewed by Radio Liberty, September 2012

“Yesterday our dean beat one of our friends. He beat him in his private parts... he couldn’t move. We had to return to Tashkent.” – Student, interviewed by Radio Liberty, October 2012



College of Construction and Communal Services, Tashkent region, closed for the cotton harvest
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B. Government employees

The government of Uzbekistan forced about one out of every six government employees to pick cotton in 2012, including teachers, doctors, nurses, members of the military, ministry offices and others. Among teachers, the percentage soared to 60% of all teachers forced to work in the fields. The mass mobilization of government employees began as early as September 3rd. Each organization was obliged to delegate a certain number of staff members to pick cotton, and administrators scheduled shifts of their personnel to pick cotton for 2-3 weeks at a time. Upon one group’s return from the field, the administrator would send another until the organization met the quota of cotton assigned by the regional authorities.

Adults coercively mobilized from the cities were required to deliver 60-80 kilograms of cotton per day, depending on the region. The work routine was harsh, starting the day as early as 4:30 AM and working in the fields for 10-12 hours until late into the evening. If a cotton picker failed to deliver the quota expected, (s)he had to buy the remainder from local residents. If a cotton picker did not have the means to pay, the amount was deducted from his or her salary. Some of the larger public organizations collected money from staff who did not go out to the fields— due to severe illness or because they had young children— to pay for the missing kilograms, but cotton pickers from smaller organizations bore the full burden of paying any difference between the kilograms they picked and their assigned quotas.

Delivering daily quotas of cotton

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Medical personnel, as government employees, were forced to pick cotton around the country and in large numbers, thereby straining the delivery of essential medical care. Just accounting for the hospitals and clinics of Tashkent, 11,000 nurses and doctors were sent to work in fields far away, such as in Arnasay district of Jizzak region. The results were striking.



A teacher picking cotton, Jizzak region

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During an interview with the Cotton Campaign in September, a resident of Bukhara reported, “My niece was ill, so I took her to the children’s hospital. They said that no doctors were available.” In another interview, a gynecologist from Bukhara reported that the same mobilization of medical personnel occurred in her region, and reports streamed in from throughout the country of the same coercive mobilization of medical personnel.

Delivery of education suffered tremendously as well. With an estimated 60% of all schoolteachers forced to work in the cotton fields, classes were combined to 50 and 60 students, and lessons were shortened or cancelled. As for the lyceums and colleges (equivalent of high school) and universities, they were all closed, with nearly no exceptions, until the end of the harvest. As of November, most older students throughout the country had not spent a single day studying during the new academic year.

C. Private Sector: Domestic and Multinational Companies

In 2012, the government of Uzbekistan did not refrain from coercively mobilizing the private sector to contribute to the cotton harvest. As early as July, local government authorities ordered private businesses to support the cotton harvest with labor, financial or in-kind contributions. While described by officials as a voluntary appeal, it was accompanied by threats of tax fines for any businesses that failed to contribute adequately. The practice was most widely reported in Angren district of Tashkent region.

Workers at the General Motors Uzbekistan plant in Asaka, Andijon region were forced to pick cotton for the Uzbek government, reportedly for the second year in a row. According to a GM worker interviewed by human rights activists in 2012, GM workers were sent to pick cotton between September 20 and October 22, primarily in the Buz district, Jizzak region. Company managers oversaw the workers in the fields who worked just like the others in the fields, 10-12 hours every day. The auto workers did not refuse to go or ask about being paid, because they valued keeping their jobs.

“There were no such cases that someone refused to go. .. Because the work that they assigned us had to be done. Do you think that it is easy to get a job at this company? If you lose this kind of job – you will not likely find another one.” GM Uzbekistan worker, October 2012

D. Lower-income citizens

As in previous years, *mahalla* committees (community-based organizations) also contributed adults to the cotton harvest. Although often described as voluntary labor, their participation is also forced with threats to their livelihoods. The *mahalla* committees are responsible for distributing government welfare benefits to low-income citizens. Sadly, this means that many *mahallas* committees denied social welfare benefits to the low-income citizens who refused to pick cotton. The *mahalla* committee members who participate are typically low-income citizens seeking additional income, and nearly all women, because many of the men in rural areas have migrated to Russia or elsewhere in search of employment.

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In the Jizzakh region, *mahalla* committees were denying child-care benefits to mothers who refused to pick cotton as early as mid-September, reported the local human rights activist Uktam Pardaev. On September 30, Mr. Pardaev was arrested and detained. Another resident of Jizzak region reported that local authorities cut off electricity for the homes of women who refused to pick cotton.

“The mahalla committee, the local police, the representatives from the women’s committee and an electrician all came to cut off power. They did it in retaliation for the women’s refusal to go to the cotton fields. They send everyone receiving welfare benefits to pick cotton. When they refuse to go, they all come and cut off the power.” – Jasurbek, resident of Pakhtakor district, Jizzak region

IV. Increase in deaths in the cotton fields

Every year, Uzbek civil society activists report deaths in the cotton fields, but in 2012, they reported seven deaths, the highest number in any single year.



Defoliants sprayed while workers toiled nearby

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Of these, five were college students. Some of the tragedies included: Igor Yachkevskiy, 55 years old and resident of Tashkent city, died of a heart attack while picking cotton in Okkurgon district, Tashkent region on September 17; Aziz Bakhtiyorov, 18 years old and a second-year student in Djizzakh city Art College, died of a heart attack in the cotton field on September 30; Navruz Muyzinov, 18 years old, was reportedly beaten to death by police officers when he walked off the cotton field in Shahrissabz district on October 6; Umid, a third-year student at Bukhara High Technology and Engineering University, was run over by a tractor as he left the cotton field in the evening darkness on 22 October.

V. Increased corruption

Remarkably, the 2012 cotton crop was harvested much more quickly than in previous years, and apparently at a lower financial cost to the government. The material costs associated with manual cotton collection were passed on to the country's citizens. The scale of extortion from state employees, private businesses and students was unprecedented in its scope and scale during the 2012 cotton harvest.

Students were informed that if they did not go to the cotton fields, they would have to pay \$200 or face expulsion. Unprecedented numbers of adults sent to pick cotton did not receive any payment for the cotton they picked. Initial indications highlighted that the majority of government employees received no compensation for their work. Any adults who wanted an exemption from picking cotton and had the economic means could pay roughly \$200, an amount that corresponds to more than the average monthly salary in Uzbekistan. The money was supposedly used to hire *markidors* (day laborers) to work in their place; however, no one knows where this money really went, because there were no transparent accounting systems.

Extortion from businessmen increased in scale and formality. As a businessman from Angren reported to *Radio Liberty*, "Taxmen told us last year that we should either pick cotton ourselves or donate 50,000 soms. We gave money without receipts and we do not know how the money was spent." According to the report, another Angren businessman reported that the levy was 4-6 times higher in 2012 than in the past, and a bank account was established into which the businessmen had to make deposits.



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VI. No Independent Monitoring

Once again, the government of Uzbekistan failed to invite the International Labour Organization to conduct monitoring during the 2012 cotton harvest. The ILO, the United Nations agency responsible for establishing and monitoring labor standards worldwide, visits a country upon invitation from the host government. Since 2009 the ILO has [called](#) on the Uzbek government to respond to continued reports from workers, employers, and civil society of systematic and persistent use of forced labor of children and adults in Uzbekistan's cotton fields. Since 2010 the ILO tripartite supervisory body has [called](#) on the GOU to invite a high-level tripartite mission to conduct unfettered monitoring during the cotton harvest.

In 2012, the ILO offered the Uzbek government an opportunity to take an initial [step](#) by inviting an ILO technical assistance team that would monitor during the harvest. The GOU, however, has steadfastly refused to grant access to the ILO.

Throughout the 2012 cotton harvest, the government of Uzbekistan continued to harass, intimidate and repress citizens who attempted to monitor the 2012 cotton harvest. The government carefully avoided documentation of the coercive mobilization of adults and children. Students were forbidden from using their phones to photograph the accommodations where they stayed, and farms were under surveillance by police. Gulshan Karaeva of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU) was arrested on opaque charges of “slander” on September 27, ensuring that she would not be able to report on the cotton harvest as she had done in previous years. Uktam Paradaev of the Independent Human Rights Organization of Uzbekistan was arrested on September 30. On October 20, members of the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan (HRAU) were forced into hiding by local police after they photographed young children picking cotton in the Kashkadarya Region.

No international company invested in Uzbekistan has yet to conduct human rights due diligence despite the high risk of complicity in the system of forced labor of children and adults in the cotton sector. While called for by the [Guidelines](#) for Multinational Enterprises of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and UN Principles on Business and Human Rights, the responsibility to conduct human rights due diligence would begin with independent risk assessments and civil-society led monitoring. In its September 2012 decision on the OECD petition concerning the French cotton trading company Devcot S.A., the OECD National Contact Point (NCP) of France stated,



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“The NCP recalls that, in any circumstance, child labor and forced labor in Uzbekistan’s cotton fields constitute a flagrant and characterized violation of the OECD Guidelines. Generally, the NCP further recalls that the trade of products issued from forced child labor, wherever it takes place, constitutes a flagrant and characterized violation of the OECD Guidelines.” “The situation in terms of forced labor and child labor remains clearly critical in Uzbekistan.”

VII. Preliminary conclusions

The government of Uzbekistan made no progress toward ending forced labor of children and adults during the 2012 cotton harvest. While they maintained more schools open for younger children and did not mobilize them on the same massive scale as in the past, forced child labor of high-school students increased nationwide; there were incidents of forced child labor of young children; and forced labor of adults intensified dramatically. Furthermore, the increased financial extortion during the 2012 harvest is alarming. Additional interviews of communities impacted by the mobilization of forced labor for the 2012

cotton harvest will continue for the remainder of 2012, and the results will be disseminated in a follow-up report.

One clear lesson is that the government of Uzbekistan was at some level responsive to ongoing international calls to end forced labor in the cotton sector. Unfortunately, the message that state-sponsored forced labor of any kind, any age child or adult, is illegal under national law and violates international standards seems not to have reached the Uzbek government. With the continuation of state-sponsored forced labor during the 2012 cotton harvest, it is increasingly incumbent on governments and companies as well investors to use their diplomatic and economic leverage to build political will in the government of Uzbekistan to end the forced labor system.

The US and EU governments should [withdraw](#) Uzbekistan from the generalized system of preferences (GSP) until the Uzbek government demonstrates that it meets GSP conditionality to protect fundamental human rights. The US government should downgrade Uzbekistan in the Global Trafficking in Persons Report to Tier III, accurately representing the Uzbek government's refusal to make significant and sustained efforts to eliminate forced labor. While paying significant rent to the government of Uzbekistan for the use of the Termez base, the government of Germany should use its leverage to urge Tashkent to address state-sponsored human rights concerns. In negotiations for use of the Northern Distribution Network, the US government should recognize that [downplaying](#) human rights positions them against the Uzbek people and on the wrong side of history.

Companies have a [responsibility to conduct due diligence](#) that ensures respect for human rights in their supply chains, even if they have not contributed directly to the rights violation. Since slavery-like practices are used in Uzbekistan's cotton fields, companies must eliminate Uzbek cotton from their supply chains until the use of forced labor and forced child labor in the Uzbek cotton sector is ended. Companies with operations in Uzbekistan have the additional responsibility to protect their employees from the state-sponsored forced labor system and avoid complicity in this crime. Companies operating in Uzbekistan should facilitate independent assessments and civil-society led monitoring to ensure that their employees and their communities are not impacted by the forced labor system. Companies should also publicly disclose the preventive steps taken to bolster confidence of investors, who expect companies to address tangible human rights risks with adequate preventive measures.

UGF and the Cotton Campaign will continue to [call](#) on the government of Uzbekistan to invite a tripartite high level mission of the ILO to conduct unfettered monitoring. Meanwhile, we call on governments and companies as well as investors to use their leverage to urge the government of Uzbekistan to end the forced labor of children and adults in its cotton sector. Inaction only ensures continued state-sponsored forced labor of Uzbek children and adults.