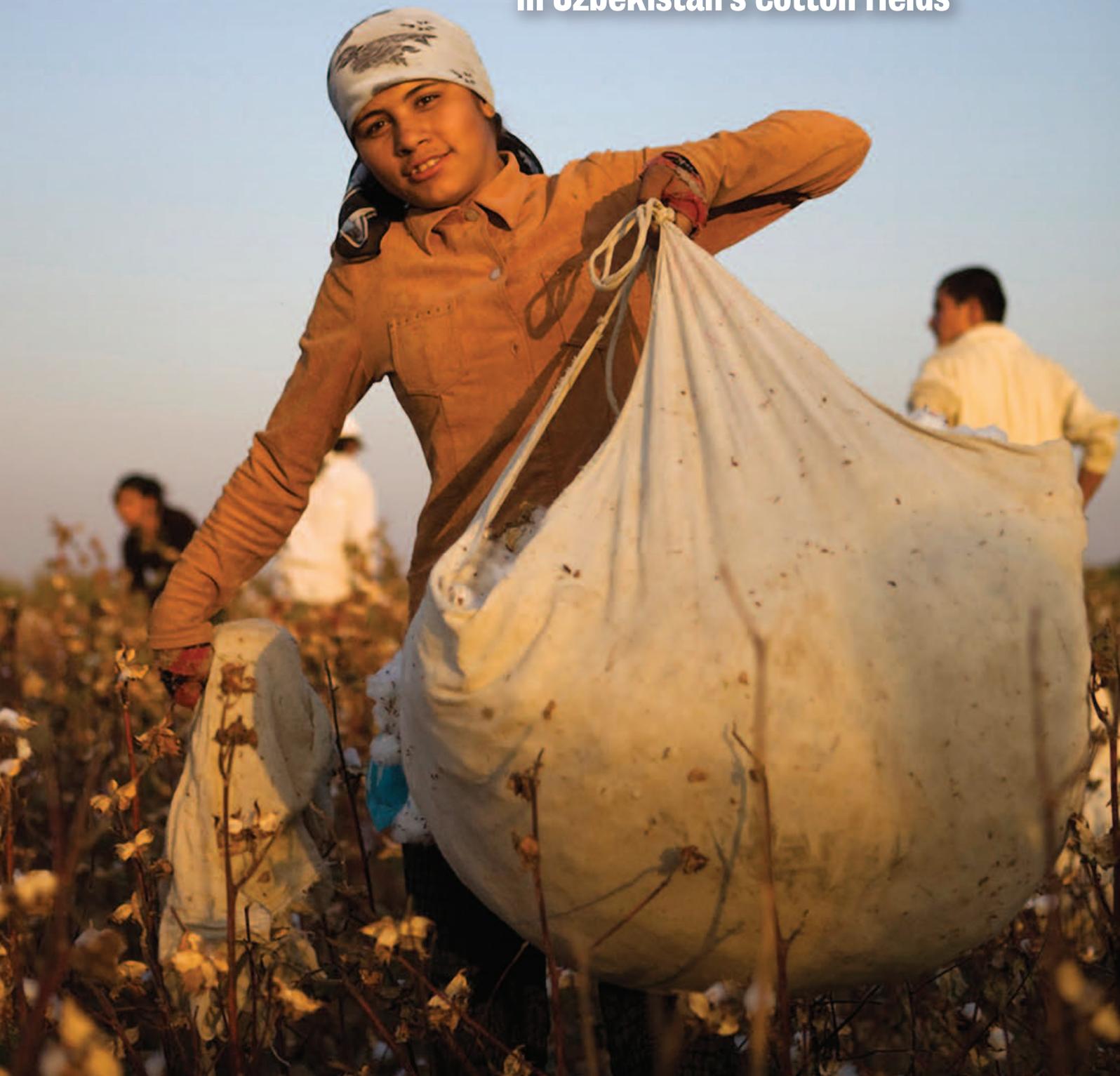




SLAVE NATION

State-sponsored forced child labour
in Uzbekistan's cotton fields



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Acknowledgements

This report was written by the Environmental Justice Foundation and the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights, in collaboration with Anti-Slavery International.

We thank the following organisations for the use of their information gathered during the 2009 cotton harvest:

Society 'Ezgulik'; Human Rights Movement "Veritas"; The Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan; Association for Human Rights in Central Asia; The Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan; Eurasianet.org; Uzbekistan News Briefs; Ferghana.ru; Uznews.net; Ozodlik Radio; BBC Uzbek service; CA-News.org; Regnum.Ru; Women's World Daily; UZA.Uz; UzReport.com.

The photos are courtesy of Nicole Hill, the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia, and local activists whose names are not disclosed due to personal safety issues. All images (except page 11) were taken during the 2009 Uzbekistan cotton harvest.

Design Dan Brown (dan.brown@ukf.net)

Printed on 100% post-consumer waste recycled paper. The Environmental Justice Foundation is a UK-based non-governmental organisation. More information about EJF's work and pdf versions of this report can be found at www.ejfoundation.org. Comments on the report, requests for further copies or specific queries about EJF should be directed to info@ejfoundation.org.

This document should be cited as:
EJF. 2010. *Slave Nation: State sponsored forced child labour in Uzbekistan's cotton fields*. Environmental Justice Foundation, London, UK.

ISBN No. 1-904523-21-8



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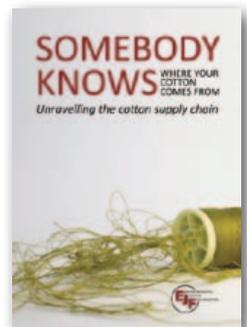
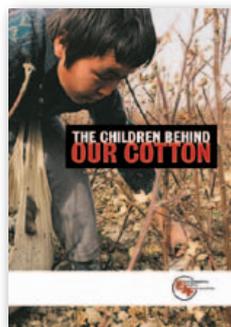
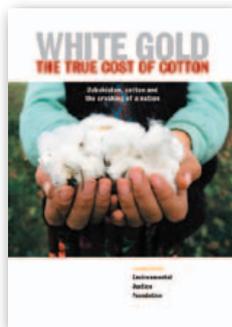
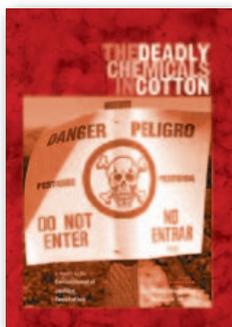
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EJF Cotton Reports



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Background to the campaign

2004 Uzbek journalists, including Umida Niyazova and Galima Burkharbaeva, and colleagues at Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Ferghana.ru and others, together with human rights activists begin international dissemination of documentary evidence regarding forced child labour. International Crisis Group publishes *The Curse of Cotton*, incorporating this new evidence.

2005 Uzbek activist Mutabar Tajibayeva releases a petition against forced child labour and calls for Western support of a boycott of Uzbek cotton.

2005 Environmental Justice Foundation documents the environmental and human rights abuses in cotton production. Travelling to Ferghana, Tashkent, Namangan and Jizzakh provinces, EJF investigators gather filmed evidence and testimonies from children, teachers, parents, farmers and human rights defenders.

2006 EJF publishes *White Gold*, report and film and investigators in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan meet with Uzbek migrants who describe the Government's oppressive tactics in the cotton sector.

2007 International coalition opposing forced child labour is formed. BBC Newsnight documents the ongoing use of forced child labour. Retailers including Tesco and Marks and Spencer announce that they will cease to allow Uzbek cotton in their supply chains until forced child labour is ended.

2008 The Uzbek Government signs two International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions, on Minimum Age and on The Worst Forms of Child Labour, but claims that no new domestic legislation is needed to implement these legal commitments.

2008 EJF investigators and Uzbek human rights activists document continued use of forced child labour in the autumn cotton harvest.

2009 Uzbekistan avoids being treated as a 'special case' at the International Labour Conference, Geneva by failing to register a tripartite delegation.

2009 The Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights initiates an open letter calling for a boycott of Uzbek cotton, signed by 47 Uzbek civil activists. EJF, Anti-Slavery International and an international coalition including investors, labour unions and the world's largest retailer, Walmart-Asda, continue to highlight the issue to companies, consumers and policymakers.

2009 Human rights defenders and independent journalists and photographers monitor the cotton harvest, confirming the ongoing widespread mobilisation of coerced child labour.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Cotton production in the Central Asian Republic of Uzbekistan remains one of the most exploitative enterprises in the world. The Government of Uzbekistan routinely compels hundreds of thousands of children as labourers in the country's annual cotton harvest. Some analysts suggest between 1 and 2 million school-age children are forced to pick cotton.
- Children as young as 6 years old – but mostly aged 11 and up – can be dispatched to the cotton fields for two months each year, missing out on their education and jeopardizing their future prospects.
- Cotton picking is arduous labour, with each child ascribed a daily cotton quota of several dozen kilos that they must fulfil. They may face threats or physical abuse if they fail to pick their quota.
- Children may be compelled to stay in barrack-like accommodation during the harvest. Living conditions are often squalid. In those places where food is provided to children, it is inadequate, often lacking in basic nutrition and children can often only access water from irrigation pipes, which carries health risks.
- Children can be left in poor physical condition following the harvest; illnesses including hepatitis, injuries and even deaths are all reported. The harvest begins in the late summer, when temperatures in the fields remain high and can continue until the onset of the Uzbek winter. Children are not provided with any protective clothing whilst they work.
- Children receive little or no reimbursement for their labour, perhaps a few US cents per kilo of cotton picked. However, payments are deducted to cover their travel to the fields and the food they are provided with during the cotton picking season, which can leave them in debt.
- Journalists and human rights defenders exposing the issue have been subject to harassment and arrest and independent monitoring is very difficult. It is therefore impossible to obtain accurate figures for the number of children involved in the harvest due to government restrictions.
- The Uzbek Government and its system of control over every aspect of cotton production is directly responsible for the continued use of forced and child labour, in contravention of its own national laws and international obligations, including under ILO Conventions.
- Children are the most vulnerable to exploitation in the cotton harvest, but they are not alone, as public employees and the wider public are also conscripted.
- Uzbekistan is the world's 3rd largest cotton exporter and earns around US\$1 billion annually from the sale of its cotton to clothing factories primarily in Asia, which in turn export garments to the west; and to cotton traders, many of which are based in Europe.
- Since 2007 international retail names including Tesco, WalMart-Asda, and C&A have publicly condemned the use of forced child labour, and rejected Uzbek cotton from their supply chains.
- This report is a follow-up to EJF's *White Gold* report (2006), and *Still in the Fields* (2009) and is a collaboration with the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights and Anti-Slavery International. The report consolidates new information on the issue based on reports from human rights defenders, independent journalists and investigations in the country during the 2009 cotton harvest. *Slave Nation* clearly demonstrates that in all cotton-growing regions forced child labour involving up to 2 million children is widespread.
- The report concludes that in the absence of Uzbek Government commitments and systemic reforms towards liberalization of cotton production and trade, forced child and adult labour will continue to be the inevitable consequences. The international community must follow the voluntary actions of the private sector and use its leverage to end the use of forced child labour, helping to ensure that cotton production brings sustainable, equitable benefits to the Uzbek people.



'When you pay the equivalent of two matchboxes for a kilogram of high quality cotton, it's easier to bend the backs and wills of schoolchildren and students to go into the fields.'

COMPLAINT VOICED BY THE
PARENT OF A SCHOOLCHILD
FORCED TO WORK IN THE
HARVEST, KHODJILI DISTRICT,
KARAKALPAKSTAN¹

A small price to pay for environmental justice



£5 / \$6 per month could help kids get out of the cotton fields, end pirate fishing, protect farmers from deadly pesticide exposure, guarantee a place for climate refugees

This report has been researched, written and published by the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), a UK Registered charity working internationally to protect the natural environment and human rights.

Our campaigns include action to resolve abuses and create ethical practice and environmental sustainability in cotton production, shrimp farming & aquaculture. We work to stop the devastating impacts of pirate fishing operators, prevent the use of unnecessary and dangerous pesticides and to secure vital international support for climate refugees.

EJF have provided training to grassroots groups in Cambodia, Vietnam, Guatemala, Indonesia and Brazil to help them stop the exploitation of their natural environment. Through our work EJF has learnt that even a small amount of training can make a massive difference to the capacity and attitudes of local campaigners and thus the effectiveness of their campaigns for change.

If you have found this free report valuable we ask you to make a donation to support our work. For less than the price of a cup of coffee you can make a real difference helping us to continue our work investigating, documenting and peacefully exposing environmental injustices and developing real solutions to the problems.

It's simple to make your donation today:

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and we and our partners around the world will be very grateful.



Protecting People and Planet





INTRODUCTION

Law breaking

The Government of Uzbekistan violates the following laws by forcing school children, college and university students, civil servants and members of the public to pick cotton:

- ILO Forced Labour Convention, No. 29 (1930) – ratified by Uzbekistan 1992
- ILO Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, No. 105 (1957) – ratified by Uzbekistan 1997
- ILO Minimum Age Convention, No. 138 (1973) – ratified by Uzbekistan 2009
- ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, No. 182 (1999) – ratified by Uzbekistan 2008
- UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989)
- The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On guarantees of child's rights" (2008) (bans the use of child labour)
- The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Foundations of State Youth Policy in the Republic of Uzbekistan" (1991) (bans the use of child labour)
- The Labour Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan (1996) (bans the use of child labour)

Cotton production in the Central Asian Republic of Uzbekistan continues to be one of the most exploitative enterprises in the world. Two years after the government promised the international community that child labour in cotton production would cease, in the 2009 autumn cotton harvest, forced child labour remained as widespread as ever. In fact, according to many reports, its implementation grew even harsher and more exploitative than in previous years. The Uzbek Government is showing no signs of reforming the current system in which Soviet-style quotas continue to be used, and farmers are compelled to sell their crop to government-owned companies, which are the key beneficiaries of the billion dollar export industry. It is within this strict system that forced labour takes place.

Such is the strategic importance of the cotton crop, which annually generates an estimated US\$1 billion for the State, that cotton quotas must be fulfilled at any cost. A reluctance to invest in mechanised harvesters or pay adults a decent living wage for their labour has directly resulted in children being systematically drafted in to handpick the cotton. Undertaking arduous labour, often working and living in difficult conditions for little or no pay, hundreds of thousands of children find their schools closed for 2-3 months each year, whilst they are conscripted to work in the cotton fields. Some analysts suggest that children are responsible for picking at least half of the cotton harvest (estimated by the Government to have totalled some 3.4 million tonnes in 2009).

Child labour in Uzbekistan is unique for the scale of the forced mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren. Child labour in the cotton sector is not a result of poverty or family need. It is not organised by nor benefits farming families or their communities. It is State-sponsored and benefits one of the world's most corrupt and repressive governments.

Over the past 2 years, as the issue has been highlighted internationally, a number of major international retailers and clothing brands have condemned the practice of forced child labour and pledged to avoid the use of Uzbek cotton in their supply chains. We strongly believe that the international interest generated by these companies has led to unprecedented pressure on the Uzbek Government, and directly led to the signing of two ILO Conventions on child labour. Meanwhile, such voluntary actions have not been matched by actions from policymakers in trading nations, including in Europe where business with the Uzbek Government continues as usual.

As this report illustrates, the issue of forced child labour has not yet been resolved, and implementation and enforcement of international obligations remain distant goals. Our belief is that whilst the Uzbek Government retains the current system of cotton production and procurement, State-sponsored forced labour will continue. Systemic reform that will ensure greater freedom and returns for cotton farmers and other adult labourers is essential if forced child labour is to be eradicated and Uzbek children given the future they deserve from their own government. The international community must continue to support the Uzbek people in this endeavour.

EJF Investigation, 2008

He told us the field managers were against photos **"because of the under aged children on the field.they're afraid some people might find out and, you know, think something about it."**. quote from field supervisor (anon) to EJF, Syrdarya region, 7 October 2008

EJF field monitors were active in Syrdarya, Tashkent, Samarkand and Ferghana regions in October 2008, just weeks after a Prime Ministerial pledge that children would not be involved in the cotton harvest. EJF's analysis based on in situ observations, interviews and analysis can be summarized thus:

- Over 60% of the fields observed had children picking cotton.
- Security personnel or supervisors were observed in around 70-80% of the fields observed.
- EJF personnel were refused access to a number of fields where children were working.
- EJF spoke with a number of children (from across the regions visited) who confirmed their ages as between 12-15.
- Children state that they are taken to the fields by their teachers; they work from early morning until 5pm, when their school bus collects them.
- Children stated that the 2008 harvest was essentially the same as in previous years – the government announcements had made no difference to their lives.
- EJF investigators noted the intensive and widespread monitoring of the cotton fields – by both plainclothes and uniformed people – but paradoxically this was seemingly not to enforce legislation and ensure that no children are working, but that there is no reporting by NGOs or media. EJF's communications with local people, teachers and school children confirms the sensitive nature of the issue, with people unwilling to talk openly, and photography prohibited in and around the cotton fields.

Source: EJF visual observations and pers. comm. with child labourers, Uzbekistan, October 2008.

Any change in 2009?

'We learned that the children have been working here [the cotton fields] since September 25. "The students of 6-7 grades are working in the fields...We all have to collect a certain volume of cotton. If we fail to do so, we will not get the 13th salary"...we observed students working hard to harvest the cotton and decided to help out the young generation. It was a bad idea: we scratched our hands severely and started sneezing. "Do you like your job here?" We inquired. The children kept silent and continued their work.' Correspondent for Ferghana.ru, Yangiyul, Tashkent region, 2009²

As apparent in 2008, the Government instead of admitting the problems it faces with forced child labour and initiating agricultural reforms to combat the problem, continues to misinform and lie to international audiences. During the 2009 cotton harvest, monitors reported to the Uzbek-German Forum that there is an increase in surveillance operatives in the cotton fields, not to prevent the use of child labour, but to prevent the documentation of the issue.

Government lies

"Uzbek Farmers are independent from the government and they involve children in order to give help to their families". Dr. Akmal Saidov, Head of the National Centre for Human Rights, during the hearing on Uzbekistan at the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Session, December 2008.

"I have never seen any child working in any field. I have no idea where you get this kind of information from". Representative of the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan to the BBC, 3rd November 2009.

The evidence presented in this report shows that forced child labour was once again endemic in the Uzbek cotton harvest in 2009.





© Nicole Hill, Bukhara, October 2009

PRESSURE TO PRODUCE

‘Cotton – is politics. To be against cotton – means to be against the state.’

TEACHER, BUKHARA, 2009³

The children had ‘volunteered for the good of the state.’

SUPERVISOR, TASHKENT REGION, 2009

‘It probably sounds strange to anyone who isn’t really familiar with our country, but it is the Office of the Prosecutor General that is de facto tasked with managing the cotton industry in Uzbekistan. Agricultural work is carried out under the total supervision of the police.’

TASHPULAT YOLDASHEV, UZBEK ANALYST⁴

Cotton has such strategic significance for the Uzbek national economy that Soviet-style production quotas are rigorously enforced. The Government, despite moves towards some limited reforms, retains rigid control over the way in which cotton is grown, harvested and traded, and inputs such as chemical fertilisers and pesticides are State-controlled. Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyayev – who has responsibility for Uzbekistan’s agricultural sector – reportedly convenes conference calls every 15 days in which he instructs local governments and farmers when to begin tasks such as seeding, weeding, using pesticides and defoliants, and harvesting their cotton, a style of government interference that is readily comparable to that of the Soviet *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* (collective and state farms)⁶.

Farmers may well be private operators in theory, but in reality they remain beholden to the State because they hold their land on a long lease rather than in outright ownership. In addition to being subject to Soviet-style quotas for planting and producing cotton, they are compelled to sell their crop to government-owned monopoly trading firms at prices far below the market rate. Selling cotton privately is treated as an illegal act. The notionally ‘private’ cotton sector is therefore managed as a giant state enterprise, and local and national government officials are tasked with “fulfilling the plan”. Since farmers have to bear all the production costs – which they pay for at free market prices – they cannot make much of a living from cotton, and even the larger leaseholders



cannot afford to offer decent wages to hired labourers, who therefore prefer to find better paid work in other sectors or in neighboring countries.

Coercive tactics and forced labour are the almost inevitable outcomes of the system in which cotton is grown and traded: threats and coercion are used routinely to ensure that farmers do their utmost to fulfill the production quotas. In 2008, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) reported that local officials including justice ministry representatives sent formal letters to farmers threatening court action if they failed to meet production targets, despite protestations from farmers who claimed the harvest would be smaller and of lower quality due to a water shortage. As one human rights defender in Bukhara noted, “in theory, farms are totally independent private enterprises, but in practice they are accountable to the state for ensuring the ‘state order’ is fulfilled”⁷.

The same was true in 2009: at the beginning of October, it was reported that farmers received a telegram (No. KR 03/I-732) signed by Prime Minister Mirziyayev, which read: “By October 15 of this year, all farms that have not fulfilled their contractual obligations for the sale of raw cotton will be singled out. Separate explanatory talks will be held with those farmers who have not fulfilled the harvest plan. Above all, the harvesting of cotton grown must be organized using each hour of good weather. Khokims, prosecutors and departments of internal affairs of districts must take under control those farms where cotton has not been picked and organize the final cotton harvest. In those cases where farms have not complied with contractual obligations, a schedule will be made to levy damages from them. Under the law, their land lease will be revoked.” As a result of such a threatening communication, schoolchildren were brought into the fields to fulfil the plan⁸.

No-one is left in any doubt that cotton holds a particular strategic importance to the State – and forced labour orchestrated by the Government and implemented by public employees and local authorities is an integral part of production. On 22nd September 2009, the Prime Minister held a conference call – in which local officials, offices of the prosecutor, police chiefs and others from across the country were compelled to take part – in which he instructed local governors to arrange a ‘*khashar*’ (an Uzbek term meaning voluntary, collective work done for the community) which was expected to last until at least 12th October, during which schoolchildren, college students, and local civil servants were conscripted⁹. Independent human rights monitors elsewhere reported that during meetings with local administrative officials (*Khokimiyat*), farmers who attempted to complain were publicly insulted and beaten by the police. Local activists also reported that the Uzbek Cabinet of Ministers’ representative in Jizzakh Region, Uktam Tursunov, beat police officers for failing

‘The reason for this [child labour] is the government’s interference in our business...The government sets targets for us but does not create conditions for our development. It deposits money in our accounts as it wishes. We all – children, farmers, the elderly and mothers – are in one boat.’

FEMALE FARMER, SAMARKAND PROVINCE,
OCTOBER 2008

‘The government forces us to produce cotton while we want to plant fruits or vegetables...it’s the government who decides the price for our cotton and decides who will pick our cotton.’

COTTON FARMER, 2009⁵



'We can't pick the cotton we've grown unless we use children.'

COTTON FARMER, KHOREZM, 2008

'It was obvious that adults would not manage the cotton harvest without children.'

SCHOOL DIRECTOR, FERGHANA, SEPTEMBER
2008

to ensure that farmers attended a meeting. He also boasted that he had almost buried a farmer alive in a grave dug by the farmer, demonstrating the brutality they are capable of⁹.

In many regions of the country, from the first days of the cotton season, mostly eighth and ninth graders (13-15 year olds) and students from colleges (14-16 year olds) were brought to pick cotton. But around the 10th October, younger children, from the third to sixth grades, began to be taken to the cotton fields. In most regions, the authorities had promised to send the children back to school by 20th October, but that was not fulfilled, nor was a new date set by the Cabinet of Ministers and so students continued to pick cotton into the latter part of November¹¹.

Such is the strategic importance and public visibility of the cotton crop, that in mid-October during President Karimov's trip to the Ferghana Valley, local authorities ordered the harvested fields to be 'decorated' with boxes of harvested cotton to create the illusion of fields overflowing with cotton and once more demonstrating "the achievements of rural farms." Hundreds of workers were reportedly involved in 'replanting' cotton along the President's route. Shops and cafes were closed for 10-12 days and signs were put up that urged everyone to go and help with the cotton harvest¹².

By the end of October, Gazeta.uz, the State-controlled media platform, announced that cotton farmers from Andijan, Surkhandarya, Tashkent, Namangan, Ferghana and Karakalpakstan regions had produced 3.4 million tonnes of raw cotton¹³. Whether this actually reflects the true harvest is impossible to tell as farmers say that they cannot meet government targets and deadlines without falsifying the numbers. In Jizzakh for example, 10th November was the deadline for the end of the harvest but farmers who lacked the cotton to fill their quotas, (and therefore faced the prospect of losing their land as well as having to repay loans for fertilizer, oil and other costs) faked the figures, bribed officials and even resorted to buying cotton from other sources to make up the shortfall in their own production¹⁴.

Unique to the Uzbek cotton industry, is that the farmers who grow almost the entire cotton crop, are unable to profit from their work and remain indebted to the Government, effectively making them bonded labourers. Nobody - except a small ruling elite - profits from cotton and, the State budget, income, costs and beneficiaries remain beyond the scrutiny of the Uzbek public, even those who produce the valuable cotton harvest cannot access figures. As one teacher noted in an interview, "We don't know the real sums of income. This secrecy was arranged by the government to prevent ordinary people finding out the real figures [made from the cotton production]"¹⁵.



Why not mechanize?

*'In the early 1990s, we had good cotton picking machines...
In 1991, children were not forced to go out to the fields,
as the cotton was picked by machines.'*

COTTON FARMER, KHOREZM, 2008¹⁶

ABOVE: 13-year old
boy picking, Bukhara,
October 2009.

© Nicole Hill

In the Soviet era, mechanized cotton harvesters were used extensively, but a chronic failure by the State to invest in equipment means that although in Soviet times, there were more than 20,000 mechanized harvesters in the fields: today there is not a single domestic harvester in use. During the early 1990s, Uzbekistan abandoned the use of domestically-produced farming equipment and began to purchase machinery abroad, which proved expensive to buy and even more costly to maintain. Uzbek farmers soon found that hand-picking was more cost-effective and today fewer than 300 American Case harvesters exist, none of which are actually in use. However, according to an April 2008 Presidential Decree, Uzbekistan has allocated US\$28 million from the Fund for Reconstruction and Development, bank credits and other sources to modernize factories producing mechanized cotton harvesters. The Joint Stock Company *Tekhnolog* will produce around 45 harvesters in 2009, but at 30,900,000 soums (about US\$20,000) they will remain prohibitively expensive for most farmers¹⁷. A specialist from the International Cotton Advisory Council has previously estimated that the cotton harvest would actually require approximately 3000 harvesters, each costing around US\$280,000: a total investment cost of US\$800 million¹⁸.

Quotas and coercion

'Our school needs to pick one and a half tons of cotton every day -- this is our obligation. Whether we want to or not, there's not enough time to do it. Our administrators promised that they would let us go at the end of October. It's already November, and nothing is known as to when this will end.'

TEACHER, TASHKENT REGION, NOVEMBER 2009²⁰

New law makes parent liable

On 3rd November, the Uzbek Supreme Assembly's Legislative (lower) Chamber discussed a draft law "**On amendments to the Uzbek Criminal Code on administrative responsibility**", drawn up as part of a national action plan for implementing the International Labour Organization conventions on child labour. The bill will make individuals, including parents, responsible for children working under conditions that may endanger their health and safety, which would include the cotton harvest. So whilst parents have little choice as to whether their children are sent to the cotton fields, they can be held legally responsible for any health or safety issues that arise there. At the time of writing, the draft law is to be submitted to the parliament's upper house for approval²¹.

Meanwhile, conscription into the cotton harvest is the Government's responsibility, but in Andijan region, parents were instructed by the authorities to write and sign a formal statement of consent that their children will work "voluntarily" in the cotton fields "to help farmers and parents", and shouldering the responsibility for the children's wellbeing²². Doctors, teachers and farmers are all compelled to support the forced labour policy, making them bear responsibility, for example, doctors have reported being told not to give a medical note excusing children from the harvest, even if the child or student is ill.



The conditions in which many of Uzbekistan's cotton pickers work can be characterised as forced labour, as defined by the UN's International Labour Organization, because of the use of coercion. Children and adults are threatened with poor school grades or expulsion, or the removal of state benefits if they do not participate in the cotton harvest.

In the absence of mechanised harvesters, and with adults unwilling to work in the cotton harvest as they cannot make a living wage from their labour, Uzbek children and students are drafted in as cheap or free labour. Indeed, despite official denials of child labour, cotton quotas for each region are sent direct from Tashkent; transmitted from central government to provincial governors, down to district governors, district education departments and finally on to school directors, who have the responsibility for conveying the quotas to staff and the pupils who are required to fulfil their daily quota. The conscription of children is undeniably linked to government policy, and children are working directly to benefit their Government in Tashkent, rather than their families or their local communities. Coerced child labour also makes economic sense: two kilos of raw cotton (one kilo of refined cotton) are worth around one US dollar on the international marketplace, for which children would be paid no more than US 10-12 cents, one-tenth of its value. However many children – and adults – earn nothing for their labour¹⁹.

One parent in Khodzjili district summarises the situation thus: "In a district of about 180,000 residents, if 10 percent of the residents came out to pick cotton, then they could quickly gather the harvest. But when you pay the equivalent of two matchboxes for a kilogram of high quality cotton, it's easier to bend the backs and wills of schoolchildren and students to go into the fields"^{20a}.

International commitments ignored, as forced labour continues

Uzbekistan has made international commitments to end the use of forced and child labour: ILO Convention 29 concerning forced or compulsory labour was ratified in 1992. A regular report on implementation, requested by the ILO was not submitted in 2008 (at the time of writing it is not known if a report will be submitted in 2009)²³; in March 2008, the Government announced its accession to ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour – which includes forced or compulsory labour; and Convention 138 on minimum age (which was ratified in 2009)^{24, 25}. ILO regular reports will be requested to determine how implementation is taking place – the Uzbek Government has submitted a first report on C182 and is requested to submit on C138 in 2010.

Despite efforts by an international coalition, workers and employers representatives, the International Labour Conference's Committee on the Application of Standards was unable to review Uzbekistan's compliance with the Conventions as it failed to register the required tri-partite delegation (comprising government, employers and unions). Nevertheless, Uzbekistan's officials proceeded to take the conference floor and used the opportunity to refute claims that forced child labour was occurring, a situation that confounded the expectations of representatives from workers and employers organisations from around the world²⁶.

How many children?



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- A comprehensive study and estimate of the total number of children labouring in the cotton fields was produced by the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies in 2008. Based on extrapolations from surveys that took place in 2006 and 2007, the report estimated that over 2 million schoolchildren aged 10 to 15 were forced to work for up to 63 days, including weekends²⁷.
- A BBC report in November 2009 suggested that one million children were working in the harvest this year²⁸.
- Some independent human rights activists estimate that between 40-45% of the cotton harvest is now picked by children, who now comprise the majority of the labour force picking Uzbek cotton²⁹.

Determining an accurate assessment of the numbers of children involved, and their working conditions are hampered by the repressive nature of the government, leaving independent human rights monitors and journalists the only source of information. Monitoring and reporting (including surveys and questionnaires) is made difficult as teachers, fearing reprisals, are unwilling to allow interviews with children. Reporters for Ferghana.ru, an independent media outlet photographed children as young as age 12, despite efforts by both the teachers to discourage them and threats to call the police. The supervisors gave the somewhat ubiquitous riposte that the children had "volunteered for the good of the state"³⁰.

What's so bad?

'He sent his 14 year old into the fields where he worked from 8:00 am to 5-6:00 pm. When it was rainy and cold, he kept his son at home, but local officials would pressure him to work. For one kilogram of cotton, his son was paid 85 soums or about five cents, and could pick about 15-20 kilograms a day, making about 1500 soums, some of which had to be used for food.'

FATHER INTERVIEWED BY FERGHANA.RU,
SYRDARYA REGION, SEPT 2009

Cotton harvesting is arduous physical work. Young children are required to stoop over to pick cotton buds from low stems, carrying kilos of cotton in sacks slung around their backs. The harvest begins in the heat of late summer and ends with the onset of winter, but children are not given any special protective clothing or footwear whilst working. For example, in mid-October in Karakalpakstan, the temperature during the cotton harvest ranged from 3°C at night, to 25°C in the daytime.

Children may be paid a few US cents for each kilo they pick, but deductions are invariably made for food provided or travel to the fields. Older children and those from urban areas may be conscripted to stay in barrack-style accommodation often lacking basic sanitation, privacy, electricity or heating during the harvest³¹. "Children are sleeping on the floor... children and everyone else are drinking water out of the trough and bathing in that same water," reported Bakhtier Khamroev of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan to the BBC in 2009³².

Health problems including infectious diseases such as hepatitis, injuries and even fatalities are commonplace. Furthermore, in 2009, due to the levels of international attention paid to the practice of forced child labour, the authorities were even keener to absolve themselves of any responsibility for the practice. This has resulted in a lack of oversight of the safe transport of children to and from the cotton fields; and a failure to provide food for the children³³.

Cotton quotas are given to each child according to their age and the area they are working in. In 2008, some reports suggested that quotas were higher than in previous years, at around 60 kilos per day, with threats or beatings ensuing if children failed to meet their targets. Students in Ferghana claimed that their daily quota of 80 kilos was twice the amount that they could reasonably pick³⁴. According to some reports, students were exhausted having been compelled to continue working after dark to meet their quotas³⁵.

Cheated out of a future?

According to official statements, children work in the fields voluntarily after school, but interviews with children and parents reveal that in many rural areas children are picking cotton from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm and are not given weekends off. Many teachers state that at the instructions of the local authorities, they continue to complete their school registers so that their schools appear to be operating normally³⁶. Picking cotton means that children are out of school for 2-3 months every year, but they must nevertheless fulfil their educational programme. Shorter school hours will have a negative effect on the level and quality of education for the whole generation³⁷.



"My daughter was admitted on a contract basis to one of the higher education institutes in Samarkand" says one 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. Once a week, we have to travel ourselves to feed her. How much this costs us and other parents."³⁸

"Children are gathering cotton, but the money they earn isn't even enough to purchase new clothes and shoes to replace those that they wear out working in the field"
Teacher, Karauzyak district³⁹.



© Nicole Hill

Physical abuse and threats keep students in the fields

Despite the harsh nature of the work, threats of expulsion from school keep many children and students in the fields. Those who fail to meet their quotas or who pick poor quality cotton may be punished by scolding, beatings, detention or told that their school grades will suffer. Human rights group Veritas reports beatings, insults and humiliating treatment levelled at students by their teachers, if they could not fulfil daily quotas of cotton they are each assigned⁵⁵. A college student in Kolikul district of Karakalpakstan told Radio Ozodlik that students were physically abused by teachers if they did not pick their quota⁵⁶. In 2008, a girl denounced by her school director for having failed to meet her quota, later committed suicide⁵⁷. The BBC recently reported that a boy who was ill left the harvest, but when he returned with the doctor's certificate, his teachers told his parents that he had been expelled⁵⁸.

On 27th September 2009, more than 1,000 students of Bukhara State University were forcibly sent to pick cotton under threat of expulsion, and those who failed to take part in the harvest were sent a letter which stated: "*In accordance with the Presidential Decree of August 20, 2008, 'On Organization and Conduct of the Cotton-Harvesting Campaign' and in accordance with directives from local administrations, the participation of students in the cotton harvest is considered 'practical training in the autumn fields.'* Students who do not take part in field work without valid reason will be expelled. In connection with this, I urge you to appear immediately for the cotton harvest. Otherwise, I warn you that you could face expulsion." It was signed by S.S. Raupov, Dean of the Humanities Faculty of the Bukhara State University⁵⁹.

Region by region

These very children, working in the fields, were schoolchildren of the sixth grade from the local school. And from their faces, it was clear that they absolutely did not like their work in this cold weather. Winds in the open fields mercilessly lashed at them⁴⁰. Djambul village, Tashkent region, October 2009

Of Uzbekistan's 13 regions, reports from at least 11 of them confirmed that school children and college students had been sent to pick cotton: Andijan, Bukhara, Jizzakh, Ferghana, Karakalpakstan, Kashkadarya, Khoresm, Navoi, Samarkand, Syrdarya, Surkhandarya, Tashkent Region. These reports provide a snapshot of a widespread, endemic problem in Uzbekistan's cotton-growing regions.

Reports from the fields

- Galloralski district, **Jizzakh** region. Schoolchildren from eighth and ninth grades of Secondary Schools stopped attending school on 20th September and worked in the cotton fields from 8am until 6pm seven days a week. Elsewhere, schoolchildren from 5th – 9th grades of rural secondary schools were involved since the end of September.

Each morning, 9th-graders from School No. 1 in Jizzakh city went at 8am to pick cotton⁴¹. Despite the President announcing the end of the harvest, the *khokim* (governor) of Jizzakh region ordered students to continue working until 20th November⁴².

- Yangiyulski district, **Tashkent** region, schoolchildren from the 7th -9th grades from Secondary Schools 4 and 5 are forced to pick cotton. Schoolchildren from the 1st – 6th grades are picking cotton under the auspices of "helping their parents"⁴³.

- Besharyk district, **Ferghana** region, schoolchildren from 8th and 9th grades were picking cotton from 8th October, along with students from technical colleges⁴⁴. A teacher in Ferghana said students would remain in the fields from 6th October until 15th November. A 13-year old girl interviewed by journalists reported in early November that she and her classmates had been picking cotton since 20th September, and at the end of the harvest and in the cold weather, she was finding it difficult to fill her daily quota⁴⁵.

- From late September onwards, 8th and 9th graders from **Navoi** region were sent to pick cotton⁴⁶.

- The Ezgulik human rights group reported that almost 90,000

schoolchildren and students were mobilized to pick cotton in

Surkhandarya region in southern Uzbekistan^{47,48}.

- **Syrdarya** officials say that they restricted labour in the cotton fields to students aged 14 and older, but reporters also found 12 and 13 year-olds in the fields. A 14-year-old girl interviewed said that almost all the students in her class were working in the fields from 8am–5pm⁴⁹.

- All of the schools in Karshi City (**Kashkadarya** regional center) were closed and students from 8th and 9th grades were sent to pick cotton⁵⁰.

- Students at high schools and colleges in Yangiyul District of **Tashkent** region were forcibly sent to the cotton fields, and school children in some remote villages were sent to pick cotton at the beginning of the season. Ferghana.ru correspondents visited two schools (No. 45 and No. 1) in the village of Gulbakhor, where they found the doors locked and the schoolyards empty. Villagers told them that the children had been sent to pick cotton.

- By late September, all colleges in the **Khoresm** region were shut and buses packed with students and their bed wraps were escorted by the traffic police and first-aid services⁵¹.

- On the 23rd September, it was reported that ninth-grade schoolchildren, mainly from rural areas, and college students from **Bukhara** region had already been sent to the cotton fields to pick cotton.

- From 15th September, college students in **Andijan** region began picking cotton; two days later, students in grades 8-11 from schools were also sent to the fields. The authorities instructed parents to write a formal statement of consent that their children would be working voluntarily "to help farmers and parents" pick cotton, and that they accepted responsibility for their children's safety and well-being⁵².

- In Kattakurgan district, **Samarkand**, schoolchildren and students were allowed home from the fields but were then sent back to work and were expected to do so until 1st December.

- In **Karakalpakstan** in early November a teacher told journalists that although no cotton remained in the fields, students were still being conscripted into the harvest⁵³. By mid-November, officials ordered students to remain in the fields despite almost all the cotton having already been harvested, and ice already on the ground⁵⁴.



School ages

- 1st grade = children aged 7 years
- 2nd = 8 years
- 3rd = 9 years
- 4th = 10 years
- 5th = 11 years
- 6th = 12 years
- 7th = 13 years
- 8th = 14 years
- 9th = 15 years
- 10th = 16 years
- 11th = 17 years

(NB. 10th and 11th grades generally applies to children in lyceum or college).



Not only children

ABOVE: Notice of the daytime closure of the market during the cotton harvest, Ferghana, 2009.

© Nicole Hill

Avoiding picking

In the city of Yangiyul, 30 kilometers to the southwest of Tashkent, there are several Russian-language schools much sought after because they are exempt from the harvest. Desperate parents pay bribes to the local administration to get their children into these schools, and education officials also reportedly solicited bribes in order to persuade the local *khokim* (head of administration) not to send the children to pick cotton⁶⁰.

Whilst students from better-off families may be able to pay for a false medical certificate costing around US\$200, those in genuine need of medical care and absence from the harvest can face difficulties. The Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU) highlighted the case of a girl who developed a skin rash whilst working in the fields: at first she was reprimanded, and later, despite having been issued with a medical certificate, an official brought all her school papers home and said that she was expelled from the college because she had not participated in the harvest⁶¹.

Children may be the most vulnerable section of society to endure coercion in the cotton harvest, but they are not alone in being forcibly conscripted. In 2009, as in previous years, markets were closed and vendors and customers, alongside teachers, doctors, students and drivers⁶², were compelled to pick cotton. A snapshot of the situation, these examples are replicated across the country:

Angren city: a decree was issued for each school to send 30% of its teachers to the cotton fields, threatening dismissal for any teachers who refused⁶³. ‘Teacher’s Day’ on 1st October was marked in Bukhara Academic Lyceum by two groups of 30 teachers being ordered to go to pick cotton over alternate five day periods until the end of October⁶⁴.

Arnasau district, Jizzakh region: the Tashkent Police Academy sent instructors and students to the cotton fields; and high-ranking officers, were paying local residents to go to the harvest in their place and pick a quota of 100 kilograms a day⁶⁵.

Bukhara city: three markets were closed from 23rd-25th October, and taxi drivers took people to the cotton fields⁶⁶. In Termez, all markets were closed in the daytime, and the empty markets were guarded by the police⁶⁷. In Syr Darya, the police blocked roads and shut bazaars during daytime⁶⁸.

Tashkent region: no sooner had President Karimov announced that the harvest of 3.4 million tons was complete, the journalists who trumpeted this announcement for the state-controlled newspapers, *Narodnoe Slovo*, *Pravda Vostoka*, and Uza news agency were sent to the fields to pick cotton in the Tashkent region. Utkir Rakhmatov, editor-in-chief at *Narodnoe Slovo* reportedly gathered the journalists and said it was their duty to participate in their country’s destiny by helping with the cotton harvest⁶⁹.

Khorezm region: Every year, there are numerous reports of hospital staff including doctors being sent to the fields, and hospitals being closed. In Khorezm region, 350 medical workers were each compelled to harvest 60 kilos of cotton daily. Workers from Yangibazar central hospital were contracted to a farm to collect 120 tons of cotton⁷⁰.

Kashkadarya region: soldiers and army reservists compelled to gather cotton as part of their military service⁷¹.

Ferghana and **Samarkand** region administrators are known to have compelled women who receive state childcare support to go to the fields to pick cotton: local residents in Samarkand were threatened with having their welfare payments reduced if they refused⁷².

Surkhandarya region: employees of regional petrol companies reported that at the personal instructions of the regional *khokim*, they stopped selling to the public, “so that people would not be cruising the streets, but participate in the cotton harvest”. The *khokim* announced in the media that people should “quickly and carefully help finish picking the cotton”⁷³.

THE ROLE OF BUSINESS

'We have formed an unprecedented coalition representing 90% of the US purchases of cotton and cotton based merchandise, to bring these appalling child labor conditions to an end.'

WALMART-ASDA, THE WORLD'S LARGEST RETAILER

Uzbekistan is the world's 6th largest cotton producer, annually producing around 1 million metric tonnes (MT) (1,002,000 MT in 2008/9) from 1 million hectares of cotton fields⁷⁴. The Ministry of Finance sets the procurement prices each year, and Uzhlopkoprom, the state-run national association of cotton ginners (processors), buys virtually all of the cotton produced. Processed cotton is mainly sold to the quasi-government trading agencies, which negotiate contracts with international traders. Uzbekistan is the world's 3rd largest exporter, and with only limited domestic processing and production of end-products, cotton exports stand at over 900,000 MT annually and the country contributes between 5-10% of the total amount of internationally traded cotton⁷⁵. According to figures from the Liverpool Cotton Exchange, the export price for Uzbek cotton stands at around US\$1,100 per tonne, netting the Uzbek authorities almost US\$1 billion in export earnings.

In October 2009, just as hundreds of thousands of children and adults were compelled by the State to hand pick cotton, the Uzbek Government announced contracts to sell 1 million tonnes of cotton to buyers mainly from Bangladesh, Iran, China, South Korea, Moldova, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Russia, Turkey and Japan⁷⁶. Bangladesh is the destination of a large proportion of Uzbekistan's raw cotton: the ready-made garment industry manufactures it into clothes, of which 61% are exported to the European Union⁷⁷. There is therefore a good chance that a proportion of the cotton in goods where the country of origin is unknown, is from Uzbekistan.

Once picked, cotton undergoes a number of processes including ginning, spinning, weaving or knitting, dyeing and finishing as well as passing through traders, merchants and agents, making long supply chains that are not always straightforward to trace. Whilst companies including H&M and Inditex (neither of which have worked to exclude the use of Uzbek cotton in their supply chains) were recently linked to a Bangladesh supplier, which uses up to 50% Uzbek cotton in its products⁷⁸, such has been the public disquiet over the use of forced labour, that a number of western retailers have banned the use of Uzbek cotton in their products and have put in place systems to begin to track and trace the origin of the cotton in their supply chains. Despite the complexity, Tesco has led the way in tracing their supply chains using the usual paperwork associated with customs declarations and a computerised system known as 'My String'. Walmart-Asda, C&A, Gap, Levi's, Marks and Spencer and Nike are some of the companies that have also taken action to ban the use of Uzbek cotton. This, together with coordinated action of investors, labour unions and non-governmental organisations has put pressure on the Uzbek regime and can be credited with the government's decision to sign ILO Conventions 182 and 138 in 2008. Meanwhile voluntary actions by the private sector have not been matched by coherent, consistent and effective action by national governments and international policy-makers, including trade partners.

CONCLUSIONS

Uzbekistan has ratified two ILO Conventions to end the use of forced child labour and establish a minimum working age and would rightly have been expected to begin a concrete action plan to ensure the timely, effective implementation of these conventions. Not so. Instead evidence from multiple, credible sources demonstrate that State-sponsored forced child labour remains prevalent across Uzbekistan's cotton-growing regions. Child labour in Uzbekistan does not result from poverty or family need – it is uniquely modern-day slavery where children are forced by the State to work in a sector, which directly benefits one of the world's most brutal, corrupt and repressive regimes. Whilst the physical wellbeing and educational prospects of hundreds of thousands of Uzbek children are being jeopardised, the government is profiting and making no concessions towards ending forced labour.

In the absence of systemic and rigorous structural changes to the cotton sector that will incentivise affordable mechanisation or proper salaries for adult labourers, plans to end forced child labour appear doomed. The Uzbek Government is pre-

siding over an industry in which forced labour is the norm; and it must now take concrete steps towards introducing systemic reforms that will ensure greater freedom, decision-making ability and economic returns for cotton farmers. Time-bound commitments towards ending the state-owned domination of production, trade and exports, together with the quota system are essential to revitalize the cotton sector, secure adult employment and in turn, support rural development by passing decision-making back to farmers. Such changes will help to produce an economically viable and socially sustainable cotton industry, and are essential if child labour is to be eradicated.

This report concludes that little has changed in the cotton fields since the Government of Uzbekistan ratified ILO Conventions on child and forced labour. In conjunction with dialogue between policymakers, it is therefore imperative that the private sector takes action to ensure that forced labour is not part of their supply chains. Together with non-governmental organisations, investors and unions, retailers can contribute towards efforts to end this exploitation.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Government of Uzbekistan must publicly renounce forced and child labour in the cotton industry and take urgent action to end this practice. It must put in place a comprehensive plan and practical commitments to end forced labour in the cotton industry, to ensure implementation and enforcement of its obligations under ILO Conventions and existing domestic legislation on forced and child labour, and commit all resources necessary to the implementation of this action plan.
2. International financial institutions, organisations such as the OECD, and bilateral trading partners, together with corporate and private business should support calls for greater transparency in the revenue streams derived from the sale and export of cotton.
3. The Uzbek Government should commit to reinvesting revenue from the sale of cotton and its products in rural development programmes, including education and environmental protection that will sustain rural populations. As a first step the government should commit to disclosing income and expenditures from the cotton sector, and the key beneficiaries.
4. The European Union should remove the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) customs privileges, which Uzbekistan currently benefits from for its cotton exports to the European Union until such time as proven change has taken place.
5. The European Union, USA, national governments and trading partners should devise protocols by which independent monitoring of the cotton harvest can be undertaken.
6. The EU Commission must continue to reiterate its concerns regarding child labour in the EU-Uzbekistan Human Rights dialogue, and urge Uzbekistan to allow journalists and NGOs access to the cotton harvest.
7. International financial institutions, including the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which have investments in projects in Uzbekistan must ensure that their funds do not support cotton production to the detriment of children, their education and long-term rural and national development objectives.

Conditionalities and incentives that support sustainable and equitable rural development should be devised and structured within all frameworks for project funding, and benchmarks must be established to measure progress.
8. Cotton traders, international clothing manufacturers and retailers, together with the trade associations that represent them, should add their support to the growing number of companies that have rejected the use of Uzbek cotton until such time as forced child labour is eradicated from its production. Companies should also make public their support for positive action and convey their disquiet and concern direct to the Uzbek Government.
9. Cotton traders, clothing manufacturers and retailers should work towards a transparent supply chain for the cotton they buy and sell, and ensure that their suppliers at all levels of the supply chain commit to not using Uzbek cotton. Computerized track and trace schemes should be a minimum requirement to ensure transparency.
10. Consumers should demand labels on their cotton clothing that show the country of origin for the cotton fibre, so that they can make informed buying choices. Consumers should raise their concerns with retailers, ask what their policy is on Uzbek cotton, and ask that they refrain from using Uzbek cotton in their products until such time as forced labour is eradicated from the production process.
11. International private finance houses and individual investors should review investments in companies that are linked to the Uzbek cotton trade, including major clothing brands, and use their leverage to support positive change in corporate policies.
12. Relevant public agencies, which procure uniforms for military services; emergency services and national health services – should undertake a review of their procurement practices to ensure that Uzbek cotton produced by forced child labour does not enter their supply chains.
13. The OECD should take note of complaints to National Focal Points relating to the activities of trading companies with direct links to Uzbekistan's cotton export sector.
14. Government, worker and employer organisations should press for Uzbekistan to be considered as a 'special case' in the 2010 International Labour Conference Committee on the Application of Standards, in order to review Uzbekistan's compliance with its Convention commitments.



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