



International Labor Rights Forum

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Uzbekistan update: Government still forcing young children to harvest cotton despite pledges to ban the practice

***A group of human rights defenders in Uzbekistan
International Labor Rights Forum***

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This report is based on information gathered by human rights defenders within Uzbekistan in September/October 2008. Contrary to the government of Uzbekistan's assertions that it has banned forced child labor, recent information suggests it continues to compel children as young as 11 and 12 to pick cotton, closing schools and using other coercive measures to enforce compliance. Although Uzbekistan has recently signed two ILO conventions against forced and child labor, and issued a new decree ostensibly prohibiting the practice, information from around the country shows that the government continues to rely on the state-orchestrated mass mobilization of children to bring in the 2008 cotton harvest. Uzbekistan is the world's third largest exporter of cotton, and cotton is that country's largest source of export revenue.

Children already in the fields for weeks

According to reports from nine of Uzbekistan's twelve territorial units, (Jizzakh, Fergana, Namangan, Syr Daria, Surkhandaria, Bukhara, Khorezm, Tashkent and Samarkand provinces) by the third week of September local governments and school administrators had already sent children as young as the seventh grade (ages 13-14), and in some cases as young as fifth grade (11-12) out to the fields to pick cotton. By the end of September, pressure to bring in the harvest before rains began near the end of the month led local officials to order the smallest schoolchildren, from first grade on, to labor on the harvest.

In Fergana, schools were closed and children were sent out from September 22, though a week earlier those same schools forced children to sign statements that they would remain in school over the fall semester. Journalists on the scene suggested that these statements were intended to give local government officials plausible deniability if the children's presence in the fields was challenged.

In one Namangan district, journalists and human rights defenders observed children from several schools, some as young as eleven, picking cotton. The children reported that each day local government officials and bureaucrats from the local education department would visit the fields to check up on the number of pupils out picking, and to make sure that harvest targets were being met.

The Samarkand provincial government also sent its schoolchildren out to pick cotton on September 22. Children as young as 13 were forced from their classrooms on that date, though

high school, junior college as well as university students (ages sixteen and above) had already been sent out to the fields for several weeks by that time, according to sources in the province.

In Jizzakh, local governments began to bus high school and junior college students, aged fifteen and up, out to the cotton fields by mid-September. Reports from the field indicated that as in previous seasons, and as in the rest of the country, children there were housed in unheated barracks without access to drinking water or adequate food. In Syr Daria, a major cotton growing region, high school and junior college students were sent out promptly on September 9.

Even children from urban areas, including the industrial town of Almalyk in Tashkent province, are reportedly being pressed into service this year, as in years past. Almalyk schoolchildren were sent to the cotton fields on October 1, though high school and junior college students (grade nine and above, or ages 15-17) were already out picking since early September. In addition to these areas, activists in Bukhara, Surkhandaria and Khorezm provinces have also reported children picking cotton in September.

Initial reports suggest that conditions on this year's harvest may be more abusive than in years past. Several young people interviewed by the news website Fergana.ru have run away from the fields where they were housed in October. The children reported that though the under-ripe cotton is much harder to pick this season, their obligatory daily quotas were set at a higher level than usual (60 kg., rather than 30-40kg), and they were beaten, by teachers, farmers and others, for not meeting them. Farmers did not feed the children, nor was potable water available. In all the provinces surveyed, respondents conveyed the increased desperation and harshness in the 2008 forced labor campaign. The use of children aged seven to eleven is unusual, even by the standards of Soviet times.

Surveys show that farmers this year are providing little if any resources to transport children to the fields, leaving them to walk long distances on their own. Low rainfall, many observers say, will yield a smaller harvest than usual, prompting local officials to increase the pressure on children to pick every boll in the fields. Though children in several provinces were promised that their labors would end by November 1, local officials' desire to maximize the harvest totals at whatever cost is now reportedly keeping them in the fields until November 15. In addition, there are more and more reports of children not receiving even the minimal customary pay for their labor.

Finally, lack of adequate protections for the health and safety and well-being of child laborers has already led to five reported fatalities this season. Local advocates report that children have perished from drowning in ponds and irrigation canals while trying to wash or clean dishes. Two adolescents have died from traumas received in fights. A first grade girl was hit by a car and died while walking to the cotton fields without any adult supervision. Most chillingly, a teenage girl in Jizzakh province has committed suicide after being denounced by her school administration for not meeting her daily cotton picking quota.

Corruption has permeated the forced labor economy of cotton even more deeply in 2008. Sources from several provinces relate that officials are demanding parents pay bribes of from 100 to 200 USD to keep their children out of the cotton fields. This, in a country where public sector workers earn 20-30 USD per month is a ruinous sum. Teachers themselves are being fined by the local authorities this year from two to three and a half thousand sum (1.5-3 USD) per child for each pupil absent each day from the fields. Reports from a local human rights association, the Rapid Reaction Group, indicate that schoolchildren who cannot fulfill their daily picking quotas are being forced to make up the difference in cash, which teachers then pass on to the local government representatives.

Reported government “ban” meaningless

Some news outlets have misleadingly reported that the Government of Uzbekistan has ratified two international instruments prohibiting child labor, International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions 182 and 138, on the Minimum Age for Employment and Against the Worst Forms of Child Labor. In fact, according to the ILO, while both conventions have been signed by the Uzbek government, only Convention No. 182 has been properly deposited and it will not be considered to be in force until one year from the date of deposit, or July 2009.

On September 12, Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyayev issued a brief and vaguely-worded decree instructing the government to implement a national “action plan,” purportedly developed as an instrument to combat child labor. No further details on this action plan were made available, and the public was not informed of this decree as it was not publicized by the local press. The decree followed rumors of Mirziyayev’s oral instructions to governors to avoid using children in the cotton fields.

Nevertheless, ten days later, governors in at least five provinces had issued orders to mobilize children for the harvest. No such instructions can be given on the provincial level without clearance from the head of government. Deputy governor of Syr Daria province, Islom Shodmonkulov, warned that any person trying to block children’s participation in the cotton harvest would be named “an enemy of the people.” Human rights observers estimate that there are 5-7,000 political prisoners in Uzbekistan’s jails, convicted for “anti-constitutional activity,” so the threat is not an idle one. None of the children in the fields, parents or teachers interviewed across these eight provinces had heard of the governmental decree. Local human rights organizations are aware of the existence of the plan but it has not been publicly shared. The local state-controlled press has also kept silent about it, although at least two international organizations, UNICEF and the International Cotton Advisory Council (ICAC) confirmed their receipt of a draft document, apparently provided by the Government of Uzbekistan, and titled “Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan.” The document stated the intention of the GOU to approve a National Action Plan.

Despite this resolution, an offer by ILO and ICAC to undertake or facilitate an independent technical assessment of the problem of forced child labor in the current harvest was not taken up by the Uzbek government. Uzbekistan remains actively hostile toward efforts to gather information about its child labor practices. In early October the government detained and harassed an independent journalist who accompanied a US diplomat on a research trip to Syr

Daria province, where the diplomat photographed children working in the cotton fields. . According to the Association 'Human Rights in Central Asia' (based in France) one of its local correspondents who gathered evidences of the use of child labor during the current harvest was forced to flee the country due to the harassment and intimidation from local police.

In sum, the Government of Uzbekistan has claimed credit for ratification of the ILO conventions prohibiting child labor but has taken no serious measures to engage or work with the ILO to develop an action plan or even to undertake a credible assessment of the problem.

Uzbekistan, with its massive unemployment, was and is entirely able to eliminate forced child labor. The country already has several laws on the books that would, if respected, ban children's forced labor on the cotton harvest. The practice clearly violates Uzbekistan's own longstanding statutes on the rights of children, and the labor code including its provisions on the minimum age and conditions of children's work. Yet despite these laws, over the past decade, analysts conclude that the government has only intensified its reliance on forced child labor to bring in the cotton harvest, due to a number of economic and political factors. Among these are the persistence of elements of a command economy in the sector, and constraints on a free labor market.

Adoption of the ILO conventions per se, therefore, is unlikely to free children from the burden of the country's cotton harvest unless additional steps are taken. The first of these must be a genuine effort to reform the cotton sector in order to attract alternative labor sources to take the place of schoolchildren in the cotton fields.

Major international brands continue to reject forced child labor cotton

Uzbekistan's latest decrees come in an effort to repair its international image and salvage the marketability of its major export product. Concerned retailers worldwide continue to reflect consumer revulsion at child labor, rejecting products containing Uzbek cotton as a component. Wal-Mart, the world's largest retail chain, joined that group on September 30 when it banned Uzbek cotton from its products and instructed its suppliers to comply. It joins leading international brands such as Levi Strauss, Tesco, Target and others. Not only international corporations but major investors and industry associations have called on Uzbekistan to halt the forced labor of children.

Unfortunately, the cotton Uzbekistan has harvested in 2008 still carries the stain of children's exploitation. ILRF calls upon the Government of Uzbekistan to complete its deposit of ILO Convention No. 138 and to respond fully to an existing complaint before the ILO Committee of Experts on continued violations of the ILO's forced labor conventions. ILRF requests that concerned international stakeholders, including the ILO, ICAC, US and EU governments, and brands and retailers of cotton products continue to use all means of pressure to convince the Government of Uzbekistan to allow a comprehensive independent investigation of the problem of forced child labor in the cotton sector, in consultation with the ILO, and, based on its findings, to develop a credible and comprehensive action plan and to commit the resources to end the problem.