

action briefing

today's fight for tomorrow's freedom

Forced labour in Uzbekistan's cotton industry

Uzbekistan is the sixth largest producer of cotton in the world and the third biggest exporter, generating over US\$1 billion annually through the export of around 800,000 tonnes of cotton every year. The single biggest destination for Uzbek cotton is the European market.

Around 90% of Uzbek cotton is picked by hand with approximately half of all cotton being picked by state sponsored forced child labour. Human rights groups estimate that up to 200,000 children are involved each year.

Forced child labour

Each September the cotton harvest begins. Many schools are closed down by government officials as children, some as young as ten, are forced to pick cotton by hand for up to three months in order to fill the shortfall in voluntary adult labour. They receive little, if any, pay.

Headmasters are given quotas which are passed onto the children dictating how much each student is to harvest. Those who fail to meet their targets, or who pick a low quality crop, are reportedly punished by beatings, detention or told that their grades will suffer. Children who run away from the cotton fields, or who refuse to take part, can face expulsion from school.

Children can be left exhausted and suffering from ill-health and malnutrition after weeks or arduous labour. In 2008 alone there were at least five reported deaths of children due to poor safety standards and the suicide of one girl after she was harshly reprimanded for failing to meet her cotton quota. Older children and those working on remote cotton farms are forced to stay in makeshift dormitories in poor conditions with insufficient food and drinking water.

Children are also forced to manually weed the fields during the growing season and there are reports of children being compelled to apply dangerous pesticides



If he is lucky, this 12 year old can earn 100-200 sums (7 to 14 US cents) per day harvesting cotton working from 7am to 5pm. Many children earn nothing at all for their labour.

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to the growing crop. During an investigation by the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), one child complained that: "It's so hot in the fields and the chemicals burn your skin."

Forced labour of adults

Local administration employees, teachers, factory workers and doctors are also commonly forced to leave their jobs for weeks at a time and pick cotton with no additional compensation. In some instances refusal to co-operate can lead to dismissal from work.

Industry response

Wal-Mart, Tesco, GAP, NIKE and Marks & Spencer, amongst others, have taken action to ban Uzbek cotton from their products, although many retailers have yet to make this commitment.

Uzbekistan government's response

In September 2008, the Prime Minister of Uzbekistan signed a decree to ratify International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour and ILO Convention 138 on the Minimum Age for Employment, assuring the international community that forced child labour had been outlawed. The government denies that new domestic legislation is needed to implement these legal commitments. Furthermore, the government failed to carry out an independent assessment of forced labour during the 2009 cotton harvest, which it had promised to do.

2009 harvest- forced labour continues

Despite the recent assurances from the Uzbekistan government, Anti-Slavery International and EJF have obtained new evidence of children forced to pick cotton during Uzbekistan's 2009 cotton harvest, which ended in December 2009. Human rights defenders, independent journalists and photographers all monitored the cotton harvest in 2009 confirming the ongoing widespread mobilisation of forced child labour in the country.

Forced labour and slavery

Forced labour is any work or service which people are made to do against their will under threat of some form of punishment.

Forced labour is a contemporary form of slavery, which has a number of key characteristics:

- forced to work, through mental or physical threat;
- controlled by an 'employer', under the threat of some form of punishment;
- dehumanised, treated as a commodity or bought and sold as 'property';
- physically constrained or has restrictions placed on their freedom of movement.

Stories from the cotton harvest

* “We’re really afraid of getting expelled from school. Every September 2, the first day of school, the Director warns us that if we don’t go out to pick cotton we might as well not come back to school. The school administration does everything to create the impression that the schoolchildren themselves are the ones who have decided to go out to the cotton fields. But just try to “voluntarily” not go out to the harvest! We’re all forced to obey this unwritten law. And, the only way to get cash is to go out and pick cotton. It’s painful to see how the kids knock themselves out in the cotton fields to earn this rotten money. Just think about it: in order to earn 50 sum (four US cents), a kid who is barely 14 has to bend down to the cotton bush over 50 times. And his earnings from a day of this work won’t even buy him a pair of ugly socks.”

Boy, ninth grade (14 years old), Kashkadaria province

* “This year the chairman of the collective farm insisted that I go out to pick cotton, and my daughter in law and remaining children, otherwise he would take our plot away [garden plot used to grow fruits and vegetables]. The chairman said that if we don’t go out, i’ll have to pay one hundred thousand sum (approximately US\$70- equivalent to more than three average monthly wages). When I said there was no way I could pay that kind of money, he started to threaten that in that case we wouldn’t get the welfare payment. I don’t know where to turn to complain.”

Mother of six children, Boiavut district

* *Forced Child Labour in Uzbekistan's 2007 Cotton Harvest: Survey Results* by Group of Human Rights Defenders and journalists of Uzbekistan, (Tashkent, 2008) Available at: <http://www.laborrights.org>

What you can do about it

Write to retailers:

- Express your concerns about state-sponsored forced child labour in the Uzbek cotton industry. Many schools are closed down as children, some as young as ten, are forced to pick cotton by hand for up to three months during the cotton harvest. Students who refuse can be beaten or face expulsion from school.
- Ask where the cotton in their products originates from and tell them that you would like assurances that they will not use Uzbek cotton until such time as forced labour is eradicated from the production process.
- Ask them to label their cotton clothing with the country of origin of the cotton and not just the country of manufacture.

Write to your MEP:

If you live in a European Union country, please write to your MEP. Please also send a copy of this letter to your local elected representative.

- Express your concerns about forced child labour in Uzbekistan. Ask your MEP why the European Trade Commission is continuing to allow Uzbekistan to benefit from preferential import duties for its cotton exports to the EU. Ask that steps will be taken to remove these benefits, ensure independent monitoring of the cotton harvest and what other steps the Commission will take to ensure forced child labour is eradicated from Uzbek cotton production.

Please write to:

Retailers

Please write to the Chief Executives of your favourite retail chains. You can find the address of the company’s headquarters on your receipts or on their website (sometimes under terms and conditions).

Some retailers such as Wal-Mart (Asda), Tesco, GAP and Marks & Spencer, amongst others, have already taken action to ban Uzbek cotton from their products. However, many retailers have yet to make this commitment. In particular, recent investigations have linked clothes made by high-street chains Zara & H&M to cotton from Uzbekistan.

MEPs

Each EU country is divided into regions that are represented by a number of MEPs. You can contact any or all of the MEPs for your region.

You can find information about the European Parliament at www.europarl.eu.int including who your MEPs are and how to contact them.

You can also find out who your MEPs are and write to directly them through the website: www.writetothem.com

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