

White Gold

Uzbekistan, A Slave Nation
For Our Cotton?



Environmental Justice Foundation
in partnership with the
Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights





“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.”
Parent of schoolchild forced to harvest cotton
Karakalpakstan 2009¹

WELCOME

Since 2004, the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) has documented and exposed the use of forced labour and environmental damage in cotton production in the Central Asian Republic of Uzbekistan. Over the past 6 years, we have produced 3 campaign reports and ‘White Gold’, an award-winning film, and we have led an international coalition, which now comprises international NGOs, labour unions and international retailers and clothing brands.

EJF works with the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights (UGF), which has documented the issue in Uzbekistan for the past 3 years and whose information and visual images have been invaluable contributions to this briefing and exhibition. The work of UGF, human rights activists and NGOs, together with independent journalists is essential in documenting and exposing abuses linked to cotton production, and supporting human rights in Uzbekistan.

As the 2010 cotton harvest reaches its end, the photo exhibition on display in the Upper Waiting Hall together with this event serve as a reminder of the problems inherent in Uzbek cotton production – the misuse of natural water resources that have contributed to the draining of the Aral Sea, and the ongoing use of forced child and adult labour in the annual cotton harvest.

EJF, UGF and our international partners continue to press for the international community to support efforts that will help secure poverty reduction, respect for fundamental human rights, environmental protection and sustainable rural development in Uzbekistan. We hope that you will join with us in this endeavour.

INTRODUCTION

Cotton production in Uzbekistan is one of the most exploitative enterprises in the world.

Uzbekistan - the world’s 6th largest producer of cotton - is unique for the scale of the state-sponsored, forced mobilisation of schoolchildren during the annual cotton harvest. Child labour is not the result of poverty or family need. It is at the behest of and directly benefits one of the world’s most corrupt and repressive regimes, which makes an estimated US\$1 billion [£622 million] from the annual sale of 1 million tonnes of cotton.

Two years after the Government signed two International Labour Organisation (ILO) (Conventions in an attempt to curtail international criticism) the 2010 cotton harvest was again marked by state-sponsored, child and adult forced labour.

Over the past 3 years, a number of major international retailers and clothing brands including Tesco, Walmart-Asda, Marks and Spencer, Gap, Levis and C & A have pledged to avoid the use of Uzbek cotton in their supply chains.

Such laudable voluntary initiatives from the private sector have not been matched by action at a policy level in Europe, a major end-point for Uzbek cotton.

This event aims to promote long-term solutions to forced labour and environmental damage and support for workable, durable and effective policy solutions.

“Cotton is politics. To be against cotton is to be against the state”.
Teacher, Bukhara, 2009.

A SUMMARY OF MODERN-DAY SLAVERY

With a dearth of mechanised harvesters, and inability to pay a decent living wage to adult farm labourers, children, students and adults from across Uzbekistan's cotton-growing regions make up the labour shortfall, and are systematically drafted in by government agencies to handpick the annual cotton harvest.

- Estimates suggest as many as 2 million children as young as 10 or 11 years old witness their schools closed for 2-3 months each year whilst they are taken to the cotton fields.
- Cotton picking is arduous labour, with each child given a daily quota of many kilos that they must pick. They can face threats, bullying or physical abuse if they refuse or fail to pick their quota.
- Children may be compelled to work and live in difficult conditions, drinking from irrigation pipes and provided with inadequate food and accommodation. The harvest begins in late summer when temperatures are high, and continues until the onset of the Uzbek winter.
- Children receive little or no pay for their labour – many are reported to end the harvest in debt, once deductions for their transport to the field and food provided are taken into account.

Children are promised 100 soms (£0.04) per kilo of harvested seed cotton - yet the world price for cotton fibre is now an average of £1.55 per kilo⁶.

WHY FORCED LABOUR?

"Cotton is politics, do not joke with it²."

"If they pay good money for the labour, there won't be any need to bother school teachers or military. If the payment is good, even those who are in Russia will come back and pick their cotton³."

"If the farmers pay 200 soms instead of 100 per kilo, everyone will go and pick cotton. But the farmers cannot afford that, because the cost of the cotton is priced [by the state]⁴."

"The price of cotton is defined at the beginning of every year [by the state]. The wages paid for picking cotton are set [by the state] just before the harvest begins. That's it. What happens on the international market doesn't matter to farmers. No one will pay [the farmers] extra if the price of cotton goes up. If the international market price rises, [it is the officials who] reap all the benefits.⁵"

Children are promised 100 soms (£0.04) per kilo of harvested seed cotton - yet the world price for cotton fibre is now an average of £1.55 per kilo⁶.



By law, Uzbekistan's farmers must sell their cotton to the state-controlled company (Uzkhlopkoprom) that operates all of Uzbekistan's cotton gins. The price paid by the government is about one-third of the international market price, but many farmers receive even less - as little as one-tenth the global price - because their high-grade cotton often is judged as "low grade".

Uzbekistan's government owns 51 percent of Uzkhlopkoprom. Information has never been publicly released regarding who owns the remaining 49 percent of the state cotton monopoly - reports suggest the privately held shares are controlled by President Karimov's political allies and their relatives⁷.

LAW BREAKING

In addition to domestic legislation and commitments, the Government of Uzbekistan has signed and ratified a number of ILO Conventions including the Forced Labour Convention No. 29; Minimum Age Convention No. 138 (ratified by Uzbekistan 2009); and Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention No 182 (ratified by Uzbekistan 2008).

Chronicle of a Cotton Harvest 2010



Forced Child Labour

“This is a waste of time, the children are taken away from school, they have to fumble in the dust and dirt, exhausted from the whole day in order to pick no more than ten kilograms.”

SEPTEMBER
27
MONDAY

Tashkent region

The authorities sent fifth grade (11 year old) students to the cotton fields after school. Older children started working in the fields as early as mid September. Children were accompanied by teachers and school administrators. To get to the fields selected for them, children had to walk for about two kilometers.

“At the meetings we had an announcement about the district governor’s order that all will work in the fields. School principals must find their own farmers to negotiate with about the harvesting by schoolchildren, as well as take on transportation costs”.

“At the field students will gather cotton for one or even two days. This is a waste of time, the children are taken away from school, they have to fumble in the dust and dirt, exhausted from the whole day in order to pick no more than ten kilograms.”

OCTOBER
02
SATURDAY

Surkhandarya

“I went to Oltinsoy district yesterday. 4th to 9th grades [10-15 years] are all in the cotton fields. They go in the morning and come back in the evening. Medical personnel are also sent to pick cotton.”⁸

OCTOBER
04
MONDAY

Yukori-Chirchik district, Tashkent region

Children are sent to school at 8:30am. But in the students’ school bags there is no textbook or notebook, but a water bottle and food. Having come to school with a grand entrance, the children immediately leave it from the other side, and are sent to work in the fields.⁹

OCTOBER
12
TUESDAY

Primary schoolchildren of the 4th and 5th grade [10 -11 years] were taken to pick cotton and will not return to studies anytime soon until the planned quota for the Angor district is fulfilled.¹⁰



OCTOBER

13

WEDNESDAY

Elena Urlaeva, head of the Uzbekistan Human Rights Defenders' Alliance reports that young children are picking cotton in Andijan, Ferghana and Tashkent regions. *"We have a lot of information. I just came back from the Andijan region where I have been to the Markhamat and Pakhtaobod districts. I saw that schoolchildren are working in very bad conditions in the fields"*¹¹. *"Schoolchildren of all provinces in Uzbekistan have been in the fields since the 12th and 13th of September. Classes have been stopped. Mainly 7th through 9th graders [13 – 15 years] and college students are involved in harvesting. I saw it myself and took photos"*¹².

OCTOBER

14

THURSDAY

While some districts have to some extent stopped using elementary school children to pick cotton, they are now sending 14-15 year olds into the fields. In other districts the use of even the youngest children remains unchanged¹³.



One Child's Harvest¹⁴

Q: What is the daily target for you?

A: 25kg per day. They take us to a place where there is no cotton. Every day we go to the same place.

Q: For how long have you been picking cotton?

A: 10 days.

Q: When do you go and return?

A: We go in the morning and return in the evening.

Q: Is it far where you go?

A: It's a bit far, they take us on a tractor and we return on foot.

Q: Do you eat food in the field?

A: No, they don't give us any food. They only give us boiled water.

Q: Do they take you to pick cotton every year?

A: Yes.

Harvest's End?

OCTOBER

29

FRIDAY

Two weeks have passed since the annual cotton quota of Uzbekistan was fulfilled. However, schoolchildren are forced to remain in the fields, even though there is no cotton left and the weather is now much cooler. *"I haven't permitted her to go to the cotton fields, but today they called her saying that class has started. When she went there, they told her to go pick cotton. So she came back, changed her clothes and left to pick cotton"*, says the father of the 9th grade [15 years] schoolchild¹⁵.

NOVEMBER **Khorezm**

01

MONDAY

The director of school number 42 in Khiva district, made 4th grade [10 years old] schoolchildren to pick one kilo of cotton per day and the higher grades to find 5 kilos a day.

"The cotton season has ended for 4th grade schoolchildren. But still the school authorities are demanding a kilo per day from each child. Children are wandering around the fields trying to find cotton that is not there. They cry and say that they don't want to go to school, because the teachers would demand cotton from them."

NOVEMBER **Denov district, Surkhandarya**

01

MONDAY

The cotton season officially ended on 1st November, but has restarted unofficially for the schoolchildren: *"The school was opened today. The teachers shouted at children asking why they came in new uniforms when they were asked to come in their old clothes so they could go to pick cotton in the fields. The teachers all have to find 500 kilos of cotton or else pay 50,000 soms [£19]. If they don't do that, they will all be sacked."*

*"Denov district's quota was 41 tons of cotton. They filled it, and then they were given extra 10 tons to fulfill. They filled that too. I think it has all only been fulfilled on paper and now they [the local authorities] want them to do it for real. Now neither teachers nor children will be able to rest during the day or at night until they finish the season"*¹⁶.

In Denov village there is only one school, number 26 and all the pupils are still working in the fields. It is unknown when they will return. Villagers lament that there is still a lot of cotton in the fields and children will only be brought back when all the cotton has been harvested and the rainy season begins¹⁷.

Not Only Children

“Cotton harvest is like a military situation at the moment... They even stop mini buses on the roads and empty them from commuters and force the drivers to take the cotton growers to the fields.”¹⁸

SEPTEMBER **Djizzak**

30

THURSDAY

“Cotton is like the frontline! Since it is a front, there is no time for the market. Everyone should be in the fields. We should help with harvesting the national wealth”¹⁹.

OCTOBER **Surkhandarya**

02

SATURDAY

19 year old Inom Yuldoshev, a soldier of the 1903 battalion, who failed to meet his daily cotton target, was clubbed by his commander, and died at the scene. After that, the commander hung the soldier from one of the trees nearby with the help of others, so that it would look like he committed suicide. The farm is currently under the control of the Republic’s Military Prosecutor’s office personnel. Human rights society “Ezgulik” has not been given any access to the medical investigations conclusions nor are they able to study the case²⁰.

OCTOBER

05

TUESDAY

“The cotton propaganda is very strong now. Even the football team “Nasaf” is in the cotton fields. Everyone is in the fields. Mainly the medics and teachers were taken in the first place, then the military. All the workers have been sent to pick cotton. All shops are closed. Even the traffic has been stopped, the traffic police blocked the roads. Higher grade school children are all in the fields. In the mornings no vehicles are allowed, they stop the drivers and make them pick cotton. They ask them to pick 5-10 kg cotton”²¹.

OCTOBER

08

SATURDAY

Djizzakh

Now it is the mourners and wedding guests who must pick cotton...*“They are taking those who are going to weddings or funerals in the cars to Arnasoy or Gagarin district cotton fields. I have witnessed such occasions myself. Yesterday I talked with the best men of the grooms. They said that they weren’t allowed to enter Djizzakh city and were told to come back after 5 pm and that all the roads were closed and people were in the fields”²².* The hokimiyat in Djizzakh region - on the wedding day or shortly before it - orders the bride and groom and all their guests need to each collect 10 kg of cotton and hand it over to the nearest procurement point.²³



OCTOBER **Sukhandarya**

12

TUESDAY

Women who come to get their maternity pay or food ration of flour and oil are told to either pick 10 kg of cotton or pay 1000 soms (£0.40) – failure to do so means they don’t receive their groceries or maternity pay²⁴.

OCTOBER **Andijan Region**

13

WEDNESDAY

The 10-day call-up of people to pick cotton has begun. The authorities have tightened the rules for exempting people from picking cotton. Not even the sick or the old are spared. Some university students are paying up to \$300 [£180] in bribes to avoid the cotton campaign. *“I was told yesterday that I have to go to pick cotton for 10 days,”* a middle-aged nurse said. *“When I said that I cannot endure that long in the cotton field for health grounds, the chief doctor told me that I would have to resign.”²⁵*

Mosques have been enlisted to persuade people to pick cotton: after morning prayer, the Imams, using the same loudspeakers that call people to prayer, urge everyone to help in the harvest²⁶. *“Dear friends, people of our town, we call on all of you to contribute to the harvest of our national wealth, cotton. 120 soms (£0.04) per kg is paid. If you pick cotton today, you can get your cash tomorrow”*, says the speaker through the loudspeaker. *“Don’t waste your time in the streets, go and pick cotton or else we will announce the names of those who are not going to pick cotton publicly over the loudspeaker. Blame yourselves if that happens”*

OCTOBER

15

FRIDAY

“4500 policemen from Surkhandarya were sent to Djizzakh to pick 40 kg per day”²⁷.

Recommendations



EJF calls upon the UK Government to undertake steps that will bring effective benefits to the Uzbek people, including:

- Utilise potential leverage within the International Financial Institutions including World Bank, IMF and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, together with the OECD to a) press for greater transparency in the revenue streams derived from the sale and export of Uzbek cotton; and b) to ensure that overseas aid and investment do not support further inequity and abuses in cotton production, to the detriment of children, their education and long-term rural and national development objectives.
- Review UK public procurement supply chains to ensure that uniforms and cotton products for the military, emergency and national health services, together with bank notes do not contain Uzbek cotton fibre until such time as forced labour is shown to have been eradicated.
- Support efforts in bilateral dialogue between the EU and Uzbekistan to raise the issue of forced labour in the cotton industry, and with it, to drive greater support for Uzbek human rights and independent journalists working to document and expose abuses.
- Ensure that the UK Government and in-country government staff and officials are aware of the issue and raise concerns directly with the Uzbek Government in bilateral dialogue, and seek to support long-term solutions to the problem.
- Press for the European Union to remove the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) import tariff privileges which Uzbekistan's cotton exports to the EU benefit from.
- Take a lead role within the International Labour Conference 2011 to ensure Uzbekistan's compliance with Convention commitments.
- Encourage the Government of Uzbekistan to undertake systemic reform of the way in which cotton is produced and traded, including revocation of production quotas and liberalisation of the trading agencies. Swift moves towards greater liberalisation and market reforms should be encouraged in order to promote sustainable, more equitable rural development.

For more information on EJF's cotton campaign, or to request reports or film, please contact Juliette Williams at info@ejfoundation.org





The Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) works 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 & fisheries. We work to stop the devastating impacts of illegal fishing operators, prevent the use of unnecessary and dangerous pesticides and to secure vital international support for climate refugees.

EJF has provided training, equipment, support and know-how to grassroots campaigners in Sierra Leone, Cambodia, Vietnam, India, Mali, Guatemala, Indonesia and Brazil, helping them stop the exploitation of their natural environment.



Protecting People and Planet

1 Amwell Street, London, EC1R 1UL, UK

Tel: +44 (0)207 239 3310

Fax: +44 (0)207 713 6501

email: info@ejfoundation.org

www.ejfoundation.org

EJF is a registered charity No. 1088128



Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights

Tel: +49 (0)17687532684

email: info@uzbekgermanforum.org

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