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## Call to Boycott Slave Children Cotton

by Kester Kenn Klomegah

MOSCOW - A group of civil society activists has called for immediate boycott of Uzbek cotton produced by forced child labour.

Unlike other developing countries, they say, child labour in the cotton sector of Uzbekistan is not the result of poverty but of a coercion policy adopted by the central government.

“Under the Soviet Union, forced labour was accompanied by some care for the health of children, the quality of their nutrition, and development of the rural social infrastructure,” Nadejda Atayeva, president of the Paris-based group Human Rights in Central Asia told IPS on email. “Now forced labour is compensated neither by decent payment, nor through public funds.”

Every year, starting September, schools across the country are closed for more than two months. Students are forced to pick cotton by order of central and local authorities.

Children work at least eight hours daily on the cotton fields, sometimes without rest for days. They inhale dust, laden with residues of chemicals, pesticides and defoliants used in the fields before the cotton harvest.

“Children’s normal education is interrupted to serve the interest of the small elite who benefit grossly from the high profits from trading cotton on the world market,” Surat Ikramov, chairman of the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan told IPS from Tashkent.

“It’s time to begin radical reforms in the cotton industry, to do away with exploitation of teenagers, and abolish forced child labour in the cotton fields,” Ikramov said. “As a result of forced child labour, children cannot learn in schools and colleges during this academic period, and lag behind in the school curriculum, while some children fall sick from hard work and exhaustion.”

Rights activists say that refusal to collect cotton can be punished by expulsion from the educational institution. There have been cases when students were beaten up by school staff for refusing to work for the cotton harvest. Child labour provides more than half of the cotton produced in Uzbekistan. Payment to the children is negligible.

Statistics on children employed in the cotton sector in Uzbekistan are difficult to obtain, but the London-based rights group Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) says around 200,000 children



A child picks cotton during harvest in Uzbekistan. Unlike other developing countries, they say, child labour in the cotton sector of Uzbekistan is not the result of poverty but of a coercion policy adopted by the central government. Civil society and human rights groups are calling for a full boycott of Uzbek cotton and those companies employing it in their products. (Photo: Environmental Justice Foundation)

work in the major cotton-producing region Ferghana. Ferghana is a city with a population of 185,000, about 420 km east of capital Tashkent.

“It is certainly reasonable to assume that there are many tens of thousands of children and students forced to work in the fields each year,” programme director at EJF Juliette Williams told IPS.

“Children are being used as cheap labour force by a government which imposes Soviet-style cotton quotas, and which is unwilling to pay a decent living wage to cotton farmers and labourers, thereby ensuring that children are used instead of adults,” Williams said.

“The use of children ensures maximum profits to the ruling elite, which benefits from the supply of cotton to western consumers,” Williams said. Just three trading companies controlled by President Islam Karimov’s family are licensed to export cotton.

EJF says this use of child labour violates international laws and conventions to which many governments of cotton-producing countries are signatories.

The practice violates the UN convention on the rights of a child. That convention provides that children have a right “to be protected from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous, or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.”

“As forced labour on the cotton harvest prevents children from attending school oftentimes for over a third of the academic year, it clearly violates the children’s right to an education. Work on the harvest and exposure to pesticides and defoliants is also demonstrably detrimental to children’s health,” Cassandra Cavanaugh, who was senior researcher for Human Rights Watch from 1998 to 2001 in central Asia told IPS.

“The simple fact is that cheap clothing and other cotton items in the developed world are being subsidised by child labourers in poor cotton producing countries,” Williams said. “We believe that consumers do have a choice and that every time they spend their money they are effectively casting a vote for the way in which they want the world to look — they can opt to choose cotton products made without use of child labour or in abusive conditions, and should send this clear message to retailers and manufacturers.”

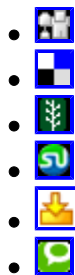
Atayeva agrees that in order to break the existing system it is necessary to deprive those who control cotton export of their unfair profits.

“Under the circumstances, only international boycott of Uzbek cotton can achieve that goal. The boycott will force the Uzbek government to repeal child labour and provide farmers with real economic freedom. The cotton sector in Uzbekistan can still be profitable without exploitation of children and forced labour.”

The rights activists have called on the European Bank and the World Bank to refrain from financing projects in the cotton and textile sectors in Uzbekistan until needed reforms are carried out.

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