



## Investigation: “Patriotic” Uzbek Child Labourers

Русский

The authorities say children slave away in cotton fields for the good of the country.

By Kamil Ashurov, Matlyuba Azamatova, Galima Bukharbaeva, Malik Boboev, Tulkin Karaev and Samad Kurbanov (RCA No. 333, 10-Dec-04)

As another Uzbek cotton season draws to a close, the country’s children are heading back to classes having done their “duty” and brought in the harvest.

Uzbekistan earns more than a billion US dollars a year selling about a million tonnes of cotton fibre, accounting for 45 per cent of its total exports. But the hefty dollar revenues reaped by the government from its monopoly export and processing business are made on the backs of the children who provide the cheap labour.

Many miss up to three months of school and make less than 30 sums (about 3 US cents) for each kilogramme of cotton they collect. Their living conditions are harsh and often they go hungry.

In a wide ranging investigation, IWPR journalists travelled to cotton fields across Uzbekistan, speaking to children as young as seven-years-old as they picked the crop known as white gold. They also met the officials who sent them there, many of whom stubbornly denied using child labour to collect the country’s top harvest.

Gathering cotton in the autumn has been considered the most important part of life for a good Uzbek citizen since Soviet times. When the collection begins in September everyone, including underage children, goes into the fields.

Many schools, both senior and junior, are closed until December with some even housing cotton pickers from the cities or other regions in their classrooms.

The children make up the lost time during the holidays, but teachers say after the arduous picking season they are tired and in poor condition. In rural areas, there is no transport, and many walk up to 10 kilometres a day just to get to the fields.

Reports abound of children that have fallen ill and died during the harvest, including a teenage pupil from the Shakhrisabz region who died of bronchial asthma while gathering cotton with his schoolmates.

“All the officials are hiding this fatality from the public,” a source in the mayor’s office in the city of Karshi, in the Kashkadarya region, told IWPR.

The [REDACTED] family from Katta Navkuvvat in Shakhrisabz said the headmaster of the local school forced them to send their 16-year-old son [REDACTED] to harvest cotton in early October. Three weeks later his body was brought home, and his parents told he’d choked to death while eating - an explanation they don’t believe.

“We still don’t know the reason for his death,” said Aktam’s mother [REDACTED].

Lawyer [REDACTED], the deputy head of a Samarkand human rights centre, said her organisation has confirmed the deaths of eight Samarkand children and university students while picking cotton over the last two years.

“No one was charged with a crime in any of these cases,” said [REDACTED].

“For this cotton season, we have two reports of tragic deaths, which we are now studying. But the region’s leadership pays no attention at all to our publications and appeals. They need to fulfil the plan at any cost, in order to be praised by their superiors, or receive an award. That is their main goal.”

Local authorities, desperate to hit Tashkent production targets, are reluctant to even send the children to hospital, because they need their labour and consider the health of their harvesters of little importance.

One angry father who asked to remain anonymous said he was told his daughter - a first year student at a financial college - had fallen ill. When he arrived to take her home, he found her lying on the ground with a high temperature.

“It took us just a few minutes to feel the damp ourselves that was coming from the clay floor,” he said. “The teachers did not let the students use folding beds, because they take up too much space. I was angered most of all by the fact that the organisers did not even have basic medical equipment – a thermometer to measure temperature.”

Much of the students’ poor health is caused by the primitive living conditions which they must endure for months on end.

Many stay in farm storehouses, without glass in the windows or doors to keep out the cold. Those that are housed in schools tell of 30-35 students crammed into a single unheated room, sleeping on the floor.

Dirty drinking water is a particularly serious problem.

██████████, head of the Karshi city branch of the Uzbekistan Human Rights Society, investigated the conditions in the storehouses of the Nishan region and found an almost complete lack of clean drinking water.

“The water is brought there and not suitable for drinking,” said ██████████. “It is kept in containers without even the cheapest chlorine tablets. The water is extremely dirty, with mud and worms in it. And our children are forced to drink this water.”

A pupil from ██████████, claimed she hadn’t bathed or showered since arriving at the cotton fields in mid September.

This year, ██████████ has been gathering cotton at a farm in the Kasan area, 120 kilometres from her home. She says she has to gather more than 50 kilogrammes a day, according to the quota set by the school headmaster.

“They feed us very badly,” said ██████████. “We get sweet tea and bread for breakfast. We have hot meals for lunch and supper, but they are without meat and low in calories.”

IWPR spoke to other students and teachers who said the main meal of the day is usually macaroni, which they have to pay for themselves.

How much food they get often depends on how much they earn, with child labour usually paid at about 2 US cents per kilogramme gathered.

██████████, a pupil from a junior class in the Pap district, said she and her classmates pick one to five kilogrammes of cotton a day. “I gathered four kilogrammes today. Tomorrow we will be paid for it. Last year I received 300 sums. I gave this money to my mother, and she was very happy,” said ██████████ proudly.

Until recently, it was primarily older students that harvested the cotton but earlier this year as part of a last ditch effort to hit production targets, children from the first year of school were called to the fields of Pap.

Eight-year-old ██████████ said he often gets lost in the field because he is so short. “Look at how tall the cotton plants are for me. My friends and I even play hide and seek here,” he laughs.

Third-year student ██████████, also from Pap, said she has been working in the fields most afternoons since September. As she put an apron full of cotton on the ground she said, “If we refuse to gather cotton the teacher will yell at us.”

Cotton quotas for each region come to local authorities direct from Tashkent. The city and regional politicians then approach school headmasters, who must ensure their students pick the required daily amount, which changes according to the state of the harvesting campaign.

Pupils who fail to meet their quotas or pick poor quality cotton are punished with detentions and told their grades will match their weak harvesting efforts. Those who run away from the cotton fields or refuse to take part face expulsion.

One pupil from the Syrdarya region, ██████████, said punishments for not picking enough cotton - such as cleaning the floor or fetching drinking water from a great distance - have recently become more frequent.

When questioned by IWPR over the use of child labour, local and regional politicians across Uzbekistan insisted the youngsters join in of their own free will.

“Our children feel their obligation to their homeland, and they are always ready when the homeland needs help,” said ██████████, a deputy mayor in Karshi.

The deputy governor of the Pap region agrees the children pick cotton voluntarily.

“People have a feeling of patriotism for their country,” ██████████ told IWPR. “In our country, no one will make adults, let alone children, do forced labour.”

On October 14, 18 human rights organisations in Uzbekistan appealed to the international community calling for a ban on children harvesting cotton. Uzbekistan has so far refused to sign the international convention prohibiting child labour.

██████████, deputy head of the department of education in the Kashkadarya region, denied that sending children to the cotton fields to do heavy labour is a breach of their human rights, saying they are obliged to work for the good of the country.

“Human rights activists can think about violations of children’s rights. It is not something for us to debate,” said ██████████.

Local authorities pay about 36,000 sums for one tonne of cotton gathered by hand but more than 41,000 sums if it is picked by a combine harvester.

But in addition to being cheap, child labour is essential to successful completion of the campaign since there is not enough machinery in Uzbekistan to bring in the harvest without their help.

The head of the agriculture and water department in the Kashkadarya region, ██████████, said, “This year, cotton was sown over 166,866 hectares of land in ██████████. Accordingly, the existing cotton-harvesting machinery is not able to completely cover all the areas that were sown.”

As Uzbek children slave for pennies a day, rural residents and the farmers who actually grow the cotton are nowhere to be seen. They say that since they don’t get paid to harvest the cotton, they prefer to travel into town to sell other items they’ve grown and work at markets there.

Karshi resident and businessman [REDACTED] told IWPR that in the Soviet days he refused to let his children to participate in the harvest and now won't allow his grandchildren to take part either.

"It was not me, my children, let alone my grandchildren, who planted the cotton," said [REDACTED]. "It should be harvested by the people who planted it. Or by the people who profit from this work."

To gain their child an exemption from the harvest, wealthy families will often pay bribes of up to 120,000 sums to local health authorities for a certificate of poor health.

Using children to pick cotton is just one tactic being used to meet government quotas. Adults are also being targeted.

From October 1, authorities across the country demanded that every government agency, business, neighbourhood committee and secondary school send five people for ten days to gather cotton at their own expense. If they couldn't muster enough workers, the organisations were told they must pay around 60,000 sums.

Elsewhere, every family in the Pap region must sign a note promising to gather cotton.

[REDACTED] - the mother of a small child - was visited by a police officer and a member of her neighbourhood committee and forced to sign a note promising to collect 300 kilogrammes of cotton.

"What will I do with my baby?" she said. "My daughter has already fallen ill while gathering cotton, and we cannot afford medicine."

But it is the use of child labour that most concerns Uzbeks.

One teacher from Pap, smiling bitterly and pointing to the thin-soled shoes on her pupils' feet, said, "Children are children, and they don't think about how months in the cold fields will affect their health. It's for us adults to think about that."

Kamil Ashurov and Samad Kurbanov are human rights activists in Samarkand. Matlyuba Azamatova, Malik Boboev and Tulkin Karaev are IWPR contributors in Fergana, Tashkent and Karshi, respectively. Galima Bukharbaeva is IWPR country director in Uzbekistan.

#### **Also in this Issue**

- [No Escape for Turkmen Ambassador](#)
- [Kazakhstan: Clerics Quizzed in Test to Root Out Radicalism](#)
- [Tajikistan's Lacklustre Anti-Corruption Effort](#)
- [Utility Debts Mount in Uzbekistan](#)

[http://www.iwpr.net/?p=rca&s=f&o=162102&pc\\_State=henirca2004](http://www.iwpr.net/?p=rca&s=f&o=162102&pc_State=henirca2004)