

Uzbekistan cotton: what are retailers' responsibilities?

ETI media briefing

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We applaud Tesco, Marks & Spencer, Debenhams and others for taking a firm stance in relation to the use of child and forced labour in the Uzbek cotton industry. Other companies have expressed a strong interest in following suit and banning the use of Uzbek cotton in their own supply chains, and we urge them to do so.

Of course, it should not be the job of Western retailers to try to stop governments from abusing their citizens. The continuing denial by the Uzbek Government about the existence of such widespread human rights abuses in its country is nothing short of a tragedy.

What has ETI done to tackle the issue so far?

- ETI was first alerted to the issue of child and forced labour in the Uzbekistan cotton industry when the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) launched its *White Gold* report in 2006.
- In response, we briefed ETI members on the situation in Uzbekistan and brokered an initial meeting between EJF and ETI retailer members.
- ETI retailer members responded positively to EJF's request to engage with them on this issue and several had individual meetings with the organisation to discuss how they might be able to help. They also carried out investigations into their own
- Several member retailers wrote to the Uzbekistan Government expressing serious concern about the human rights violations occurring in the country.
- After fresh media reports on the Uzbekistan situation in January 2008, we facilitated another joint meeting between EJF and our retailer members to discuss next steps (see '**What do we want to happen now?**' below).
- Earlier this year ETI members Tesco and Marks & Spencer both announced their decision to ban cotton from Uzbekistan from being used in their clothes. Other companies, including Debenhams and H&M, have followed suit.

What do we want to happen now?

We encourage all companies who have not already done so to follow the lead of Tesco, Marks & Spencer and others and introduce a ban on cotton from Uzbekistan for the part of their supply chain that they can trace back to source.

For the rest of the cotton supply, a broader lobbying strategy is needed so that retailers can put collective pressure on the Uzbekistan Government to put an end to the grave human rights abuses that are occurring in the country.

What is your response to reports that the Bangladeshi garment industry may be harmed by a boycott on Uzbek cotton?

Given the weight of evidence of the widespread use of children in Uzbek cotton cultivation, it is only right that ETI member retailers should take action to ensure, as far as they are able, that they are not sourcing cotton fibre from Uzbekistan.

We note that the retailers concerned are implementing a phased approach to enforcing the ban which will provide time for their suppliers to find alternative sources of cotton. Given that the retailers' requirements will be for *all* their suppliers to stop sourcing Uzbek cotton, there is no reason why Bangladesh should be at any disadvantage to any other country.

Bangladesh is a very poor country, and with up to 20 million people dependent on the garment industry for their livelihood it is critical that retailers continue to source from Bangladesh and work with their suppliers to absorb any cost impacts of the move to ban Uzbek cotton.

Why is Uzbekistan the focus of campaigns?

There are several credible reports about the widespread use of child labour in Uzbek cotton cultivation, including arduous and hazardous work and forms of labour coercion involving state agencies. It is likely that conditions may be similar in other surrounding countries, including Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, but we believe that the extent of state sanctioning of child labour in Uzbekistan singles it out for special attention.