

Group of human rights defenders and journalists of Uzbekistan

FORCED CHILD LABOR IN UZBEKISTAN'S 2007 COTTON HARVEST: SURVEY RESULTS



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Executive Summary

The use of forced child labor in Uzbekistan's cotton harvest is widespread, and violates both Uzbekistan's domestic law and its international legal commitments. This is the conclusion of a group of human rights defenders who monitored the use of forced child labor in two of Uzbekistan's provinces, Kashkadaria and Syr Daria. To protect the authors and their families, they wish to remain anonymous. This report is based on the 141 interviews that resulted, with students, parents, farm and healthcare workers and local residents.

Children beginning in grade five, or at 10 years of age, are ordered out to the fields by their schools, which themselves are transmitting the orders of local government authorities. They will pick cotton until state-mandated quotas are met, often two months or more. They are threatened with expulsion if they do not comply. Parents may also lose their jobs or state welfare benefits for non-compliance. Conditions in the fields, where children are sometimes housed for the duration of the season, are primitive and hazardous. The children are paid sometimes the equivalent of one US dollar per day but most stated that the funds they earned did not cover their expenses of food and clothing over the course of the harvest. In Kashkadaria, 70% of the region's schoolchildren in grades 5 through 8, and in Syr Daria, 98% of such children, were made to pick cotton, with detrimental consequences for their health, not to mention their education.

The drastic decline in farm mechanization since the Uzbekistan's independence was the main reason that the state resorts to forcing schoolchildren to pick cotton, according to the interview subjects. The authors call on the government of Uzbekistan to immediately halt the practice, to carry out reforms in the cotton sector, eliminating state mandated quotas, and to ratify and implement ILO conventions 138 and 182.

Glossary

<i>Brigadir</i>	director of one section of the lands of a <i>shirkat</i> [farm], which consists of several fields
<i>Khashar:</i>	popular tradition of aiding one's neighbors, relatives or the local community. In Soviet times authorities began to use <i>khashar</i> to describe forced labor on days free from one's main work (in Russian—subbotniki and voskresniki, after the last two days of the week). Most often this consisted of street sweeping and other cleaning of public places.
<i>Khokim:</i>	head of the local (regional or provincial) government administration
<i>Khokimiat:</i>	regional or provincial government administration
<i>Mahalla:</i>	neighbourhood community in Uzbekistan
<i>OVD:</i>	provincial Interior Ministry (police) division
RaiONO	regional education department
<i>SES</i>	State sanitary and epidemiological control units
<i>Shirkat:</i>	Agricultural cooperative, very closely corresponding to the Soviet collective farms (sovkhoz or kolkhoz), but usually with less land than before and with a new name.
<i>Sotka:</i>	a parcel of land equal to 100 square meters
<i>Sum</i>	Uzbekistan's national currency, equivalent to [exchange rate for dollars, euro on date]
<i>Tranche</i>	centralized distribution of resources (fuel, seed, machinery) for fixed prices and for specific purposes; used predominantly in the cotton sector which remains the most strictly centralized sector in Uzbekistan's economy
<i>Wahabit:</i>	literally, a follower of the teachings of Ibn Wahab [16 th century imam from the Arabian peninsula who promoted the return to purist Islam of the time of the founder], but in the given context usually referring to a follower of Islamic tendencies not traditional to the area, often associated

with one of the local reformist imams such as Abduvali kori Mirzaev and others.

Village assembly: local citizens' council, a local administrative organ, sometimes also called *mahalla committee*

Introduction

Uzbekistan's independent human rights defenders receive many appeals from citizens regarding forced child labor. Activists have carried out monitoring and established that the government of Uzbekistan widely flouts both domestic laws and international legal prohibitions against exploiting child labor. In the first years after independence Uzbekistan acceded to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, but despite this, minors are still forced to work by the state and coercively recruited for mass "*khashars*" [see glossary]. Though the government of Uzbekistan denies the fact of forced child labor both at home and before the international community, this problem continues to represent one of Uzbekistan's most acute human rights issues.

The practice of forcing children to bring in the cotton harvest which emerged in Soviet times was perfected in the first years after Uzbekistan's independence from the Soviet Union. As a result, around two million schoolchildren from almost nine thousand schools in the republic are doomed to slave in the cotton fields each year. The economic crisis that has seized the country in the past few years and the total impoverishment of the population have contributed to the growth of this form of slavery. The government can force not only children but also segments of the adult population to perform any type of labor, thanks to the population's total lack of rights. In addition, the recent limits set on the activities of international and local non-governmental organizations has left Uzbekistan's government without any check on its repressive activities.

Local news media and public organizations, weapons in the Karimov regime's propaganda war, are fighting to convince the world that the reality of child slavery is all a lie. At a press conference in the spring of 2002, both the minister of education Risboi Juraev and the first deputy minister of higher and secondary specialized education Rustam Kholmurodov admitted the exploitation of child labor in the country. Back in November 2001, the television program *Mavzu* (theme) on the 1st channel, deputy minister Kholmurodov spoke about the exploitation of child labor. But shortly thereafter, the government repudiated these admissions.

During the course of various international forums, Uzbekistani government officials have denied the facts about forced child labor in the cotton harvest, asserting that the state has created a total legal system for the protection of children's rights. These statements are based on the fact that the government has passed a "National Program on the Preparation of Workers" in the education, and has also issued multiple decrees and decisions of the President on Youth policy. The government has likewise ratified international conventions on the rights of the child.

In Uzbekistan, state policy proclaims as its goal the protection of motherhood and childhood, creating conditions for the total development of children in the spirit of humanitarian values. The practical realization of these goals is entrusted to various [state-controlled]

organizations, such as the Healthy Generation Fund, the You are Not Alone Fund, the Kamolot social youth movement, the Ecosan and Mahalla funds, the Women's Committee, the Center for the Study of Public Opinion and the Red Crescent society.

Uzbekistan has signed with UNICEF a Plan of Action for the years 2005-2009, according to which UNICEF will provide 9.26 mln USD of its own funds, in addition to seeking 8.56 million in donor funds in order to carry out with the government programs to guarantee children's rights.

In 2006, Uzbekistan's Cabinet of Ministers created the Coordination Council for wellbeing of Uzbekistan's children, which consists of the heads of ministries, agencies, public organizations as well as the heads of international organizations. The Council is a permanently sitting body called on to coordinate the activities of its constituent agencies in order to protect children's rights and interests.

However, the government ignores the conditions and goals set in the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, as well as in the Declaration "Uzbekistan—UNICEF," and in several other documents. It pays no attention to the official letters and statements of non-governmental organizations, which document concrete instances in which domestic law on children's rights, as well as international statutes, are violated.

The practice of forced child labor in Uzbekistan is in gross violation of the norms of Uzbekistan's own domestic law in the area of children's and labor rights, as well as the norms of international law—mainly, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child; the ILO Convention on Forced Labor; on the abolition of forced labor (No. 105); on the minimum working age (no. 138); and on the Worst Forms of Child Labor (no. 182).

We human rights defenders view the situation of children in Uzbekistan as a severe crisis, due to the inadequate social conditions, forced labor in the cotton fields, hunger and disease. We are convinced that immediate measures should be taken, both domestic and international, to address this crisis.

Description of the Survey

Monitoring and interviews were conducted by a group of human rights activists and independent journalists in Kashkadaria and Syr Daria provinces. The following categories of persons were interviewed: schoolchildren and their parents, teachers, farmers and agricultural workers, cotton agronomists and those from the agro-chemical service, healthcare workers and others.

The study included so-called qualitative methods, based on non-standardized interviews with open ended questions. We surveyed one hundred forty-one persons. In addition, we

conducted monitoring and gathered statistical data. Table one gives the breakdown of those interviewed across the two provinces.

Table 1: Survey sample

Category of Interviewed Persons	Kashkadaria province	Syr Daria province	Total
Schoolchildren	29	25	54
Parents	8	12	20
Teachers	9	12	21
Farm Workers	7	11	18
Agronomists	3	3	6
Doctors	3	5	18
Local population	6	8	14
Total	65	76	141

As noted, the government of Uzbekistan denies all allegations of forced child labor on the cotton harvest in the country, and has strictly censored efforts to gather evidence of this phenomenon, prohibiting the filming of children in the fields. The state has so energetically attempted to block all information, and so gathering evidence on it naturally involves great difficulties. Journalists and human rights defenders who attempt to do so risk repression.

Activists faced just such difficulties during this investigation. Those who collect and disseminate information that would discredit the Uzbek regime risk of having been detained and tortured. It has been proven by the fact that more than twenty human rights defenders and civil society activists are still being in prison for their criticism of the current political regime. Therefore, for safety reason the identity of researchers and real names of interviewees are not disclosed in this report.

In 2007, the cotton harvest began on September 10. Interviewing began on September 30, and finished on November 30. Each interview lists the date it was taken.

Territorial Subjects of the Study

Two provinces were surveyed during the 2007 cotton harvest season. Below are brief descriptions of each province.

Kashkadaria

- Area 28.4 thousand square kilometers. Population—2.029 million persons. Population density equal to 71 persons per square kilometer. Dry, extreme

continental climate. Kashkadaria is situated on the territory of the Pamir-Alai mountain range and on the Karshi steppe.

- The province contains the following thirteen districts: Shahrasiabs, Mirishkor, Chirakchin, Dehkabad, Guzar, Kasb, Yakkabad, Kamashin, Mubarek, Kasan and Karshi.
- The provincial *hokim* is Nuriddin Zainievich Zainiev.
- The administrative center of the province is the city of Karshi, with 77.1 thousand persons.
- Under the authority of the provincial department of public education are the following:
 - 1099 primary and secondary schools;
 - 559,997 students in those schools;
 - Of those students, 270,223 are students in the fifth through ninth grades [11-15 years of age];
 - In 2007, from September 10 to November 15, 199,223 of those students from 991 schools were forced to take part in the cotton harvest.
- There are 12,591 private farms in the province, 19 collective farms, 3 agricultural complexes, 2 stockholder owned farms specializing in agriculture, 13 livestock collectives and 2 horse farms;
- There were 136.5 thousand hectares sown under cotton. In 2007 the province gathered 467 thousand tons (with an average per hectare productivity of 22 centers). The following sorts of cotton were planted: “Sanjar-8”, “luna”, “Bukhara-6” and “Okdarie-6”.
- *Kashkadariepahtasanoat* (the regional cotton trust) operates 211 cotton delivery stations, 13 cotton processing factories, and 9 seed laboratories .

Syr Daria

- The Area of the province is equal to 5.1 thousand square kilometers; the population is 648.1 thousand persons (density of 127 persons per square kilometer). The main area is located in the steppe, with a continental climate. The province is located on the river plains of the Syr Daria and Jizakh steppe.
- The provincial *hokim* is Abdurakhim Abdurakhimovich Jalolov.
- The province contains nine districts: Baiavut, Gulistan, Mekhnatabad, Akaltin, Mirzaabad, Saikhunabad, Yangier, Mirzachul, and Syrdaria. The administrative center is the town of Gulistan, with 54 thousand persons.
- The public education department of the province has under its administration:

- 303 general education primary and secondary schools
 - 131,272 students are enrolled in these schools;
 - Of these students, 60.928 are in grades 5 through 9;
 - In the 2007-8 school year, 59,886 students were forced to take part in the cotton harvest between September 15 and November 10, 2007, for a total of 55 days.
- In the province there are 1,445 private farms, 13 collective farms and one agricultural complex.
 - 76.6 thousand hectares of land are sown under cotton. A total of 238 thousand tons of cotton were gathered this year, equal to 21 centers per hectare. Varieties of cotton planted in the region were An-Baiavut-2, S-6524, Bukhara-6;
 - “Syrdariepahtasanoat,” the regional cotton enterprise operates 97 cotton purchasing stations, 8 ginning factories and 7 seed laboratories.

Summary of the Findings

The materials gathered over the course of this investigation leave no room to doubt the mass nature of forced child labor in Uzbekistan's cotton sector.

Scale of forced child labor

In the two provinces surveyed it is clear that the vast majority of schoolchildren were forced to harvest cotton in the fall of 2007. In Kashkadaria, as stated above, 911 of 1099 general education schools took part, including 199,223 students (of 270,223, or 70%). The season lasted from September 10 to November 15, or 65 days. In Syr Daria province, the situation was similar: 296 of 303 schools took part, including 59,886 of 60,928 students (98%) in the fifth through ninth grades; the season lasted from September 15 to November 10, or 55 days.

One schoolteacher from the Mirishkor district shares the following information:

Our school closes every year on the eve of the 10th of September, or 10 days after the start of the school year. The exact date depends on how hot the summer was and how mature the cotton crop is. However the end of the cotton season is dependent on how quickly the cotton plan target is fulfilled, not only in the district but in the province and the republic as a whole. For instance, if our district and province fulfills the plan a little early, let's say, in October, then we don't have to go out into the fields any more. In other words, after the plan is fulfilled anyone out picking cotton is doing it to earn some money. But if the plan isn't fulfilled it could be December, there could be cold weather already, but the children still are out in the fields. No one can protest this state of affairs. Therefore, you can't really predict how long the cotton season will last and when it will end. This year the harvest lasted from September 10 to November 10.

A sixth-grade student from Saikhunabad district gave the following testimony:

In our school, the last lesson took place on September 11. Then the principle called a school meeting and announced that all classes for seventh graders and up are called off. Pupils in the fifth and sixth grades will go out to pick cotton after school each day. He said that after school children will go home for lunch and then come back to school to go out to the cotton fields. Our teachers told us that this season should end a little early since the weather was so good. In the previous year, the children had to be out picking cotton until November 15.

Our investigation shows that the period of forced labor can be even longer each year. The harvest alone can stretch out to three months or more, if a particular district has not fulfilled its procurement quota set by the regional government. Besides the harvesting of cotton, children are at times forced out in the spring to prepare the fields. One student in a specialized medical high school in Guzar district told us the following:

Each year the medical high school closes for five months: in the fall for three months, in the winter, for for one month (because the building is not heated) and in the spring for one month, when we work on the cotton plants and weed the fields). How high do you think our level of knowledge is, if we spend half the school year out in the fields?

Since Soviet times, the situation regarding the use of forced child labor has not improved, but in fact has significantly worsened. An elder from a community in Mirzachul district told us that if in Soviet times only college students and high school upperclassmen went out to the harvest, “now I see that even children in the younger grades are out picking cotton.” A student in the ninth grade in the Nishan district confirms that “everyone is obligated to harvest cotton starting in fifth grade.”

What portion of the total harvest is picked by children? Extrapolating from the data on the number of students involved in 2007, the number of days they spent on the harvest and the minimum amount they are required to gather in a day, we can conclude that children are forced to pick over half of Uzbekistan’s cotton:

Table 2. Approximate percentage of the cotton harvest picked by children

	Kashkadaria	Syr Daria
Number of schoolchildren picking cotton	199 223	59 886
Number of days spent in the field	65	55
Average amount picked per day ¹	20 kg.	20 kg
Overall amount of cotton picked by children	259,000 tons	66,000 τ
Amount picked in the province overall	467,000 τ	238,000 τ
Share harvested by children	55%	28%

Means of coercion

Among the methods used to force children out into the fields there is a whole array of pressure points used against the students and their parents, who, on the whole, are not enthusiastic about participation in the cotton campaign. The most common means used to coerce participation is the threat of expulsion from school. One ninth grader from Mirishkor district admitted:

¹ This is an approximation, based on the fact that after the first pass through the fields, the cotton pickers have progressively less cotton to gather and so with each day, the amount gathered declines. In the first days of the harvest when cotton is still abundant, daily picking quotas span from 30 to 50 kilograms.

We are really scared of getting kicked out of school. Our principle tells us each year on September 2, on the first day of the school year, that if we don't go out to the cotton harvest we might as well just not come back to school.

Naturally, no one asks permission either of the students or their parents:

I've been going out to pick cotton for four years now. When they take us out to the harvest, no one shows us a written order or other document. We go out on the oral orders of our principle or of the head of the district education department. The upperclassmen are housed in barracks or shacks out in the fields, but the younger students are brought out to the fields by wagons pulled by tractors. We have to bring our own food, and we eat what we bring, out on the edge of the fields. Our teachers get our pay once every ten days or every two weeks. Otherwise, they raise a fuss with the farmers or with the collective farm bosses. (Ninth grader from Nishan district, Kashkadaria, September 30 2007).

Moreover, law enforcement bodies back up the orders of the school administration:

I've been a teacher for twenty five years now. Of course for all these years I've been bringing children out to the cotton fields. For the last few years our school administrators have been talking about how participation in the cotton harvest is required by law, and is enforced by the prosecutor's office. It is for that reason that they so strictly punish refusal to take part in the harvest. But you can find pupils who will present falsified medical certificates to get out of participating. But not all doctors are empowered to give out these certificates. I have seen cases when students have been expelled for not taking part in the cotton harvest. (Teacher from Kashkadaria province, September 12 2007)

Officials refuse to take into account the actual state of children's health, and often force sick children to take part as well.

It's the fourth year I've been coming out to pick cotton. We've gotten used to buying school uniforms with the money I bring home from the harvest. So it's a way I can help my parents. Last year right after the cotton campaign I got sick with hepatitis. The doctor said I got infected from dirty water. The tractor that was supposed to bring us drinking water broke down, and we had to drink from the irrigation canal. Along the borders of the canal they had spread saltpeter and so many kids got poisoned. Some of them got sick like I did. However no one gave any of us any medical assistance, or medicine. When the chairman of the farm, the district khokim and the auxiliary policeman came out into the cotton fields, they threw stones at the kids who weren't picking because they were sick. And if any of them got hold of you, they would beat you. A few of the students, being afraid of them, would run from field to field and hide. (Tenth grader, Mirzachul district).

Parents often find grounds on which they try to avoid sending their children out to the cotton harvest, but these attempts do not always help:

I didn't allow my youngest daughter to go out to the harvest. The sixth grade head teacher [identifying details omitted] sent me an official letter in which he wrote that if I don't send her out to pick cotton, then she can be expelled from school. The letter even had the official

stamp of the school and the signature of the assistant principal. I was so mad I tore it into pieces. The next morning the teacher comes to our house and demands that I give him back the letter. I told him that I tore it up. He asked where did I throw the pieces, and went out to the garbage and picked out every one. I don't understand why he did this (parent, Shakarbulak village, November 2 2007).

Alongside direct coercive measures, authorities use demagoguery and rabidly patriotic brainwashing:

Before the start of the harvest season our principal always gathers the students and tells them that cotton is our national pride, and it is our duty to gather the harvest. Most of the students understand that our participation in the cotton harvest is obligatory. However there are a few who get out of it somehow. There aren't a lot of them. We don't know about the rights you're telling us about, that we are free to work or not work. We have a lesson in our school on rights, but our teacher for this class has never told us about our rights, and the textbooks don't say that children's rights are guaranteed. (Ninth grader, Saikhunabad district, October 15 2007).

"Unpatriotic" parents may find themselves victims of other forms of blackmail, such as the refusal to pay out social welfare subsidies. One resident of Boiavut district told us the following:

I have six children. A year and a half ago already, my husband and eldest son went off to work in Russia. I married off two of my daughters. Two of my sons study in the district center, one in the seventh grade, the other in the ninth. This year was the first year they forced my seventh grader to go out to pick cotton. He's a weak boy; two years ago he got sick with hepatitis. Next to our house we have a garden plot, where we grow fruits and vegetables to sell and somehow earn a living. 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. How can I go out to pick cotton? (Cries). My daughter in law is pregnant. The chairman said that if we don't go out, I'll have to pay one hundred thousand sum [approximately 80 dollars, or 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 from the mahalla.

Government representatives admit to these kinds of actions. The mahalla chairman from a village in Saikhunabad district makes clear that he uses the payment of social benefits as a lever to pressure disobedient families:

Question: Do you feel under stress?

Answer: I'm going out of my mind. I tell people: time to go out to pick cotton. No, they don't go. They don't get it. I'm not telling them to go out and work in my personal garden! Not long ago I got into an argument with one young woman who has a two month old baby. She

came to the mahalla to get the baby's welfare payment. ² I explained that there is no cash, but she doesn't get it and continues to get on my nerves. So I said that she should leave her baby with her mother in law and go out and pick cotton. Her father in law comes to my house that evening. I got so mad, I threw the application for the welfare payment back at him. Now they won't get any payments for that child for a year. She'll only get them next year if she goes out to pick cotton. Anyway, you can usually only get cash during the harvest season.

Question: How much is the payment?

Answer: Ten thousand sum

Question: So, in the mahalla in order to get social welfare payments for children, you have to take part in the cotton harvest?

Answer: There's no other way to get people to go out and pick cotton. They don't listen to any other authority. It seems like there's no other way. (November 5, 2007)

Matters may become even more serious when parents who keep their children away from the harvest may be charged with a crime. A resident of Boiavut district recounted the following story:

*Don't even ask about that, I'm not going to answer the question. I've lived in this village for thirty five years. All my life, and that of my wife, has been spent out in the fields. We have three children. They go to the *** school across the street. The oldest boy is in the eighth grade. September 5 their teacher told them that they are going out to pick cotton. My son and four or five other boys objected, and said they wouldn't go. The teacher let the other pupils go, but kept my son and the other boys in the classroom and beat them up, badly. My son came home in the evening in tears, with a swollen face and two black eyes. The next day I went to the school and met with the curriculum director. He refused to listen and called me an enemy of the people. I said to him "I've bent my back in these cotton fields my whole life and enough is enough. My son is going to live differently. I want him to study, to become educated, to occupy some responsible position." The curriculum director [name omitted] started to bang his fists on the desk and say that he would call the police, that I should stop lecturing him, and threw me out. He spoke to me in the informal, and really insulted me.³ So even though we didn't have any other food in the house, I packed what food we did have for my son's meal [out in the fields]. What else could I have done? After all, the only thing they give the cotton pickers for lunch is some potatoes, cabbage or macaroni. Last year five or six school kids, from my son's school, broke into houses trying to steal food. Their parents had quite a time trying to get them out of the police station. So, those were my thoughts as I left the school. (October 23, 2007)*

² It is state policy that the income support payments for poor families with children are given out by the local citizens' councils (mahalla committees).

³ Translator's note: similar to the French "vous" and "tu," Uzbek has formal and informal personal pronouns; in Uzbek, however, to speak to another adult who is not extremely close in the informal is considered extremely demeaning.

The shift from *shirkats* to private farms has not affected the use of forced child labor. Firstly, this is because the farms, like the *shirkats* and collective farms before them, remain objects of administrative fiat. In the second place, it does not depend on the wishes of the farmers themselves, as they are forced to accept the children's labor. One farmer from Saikhunabad district explained:

Every year they tell us "You take such and such a high school, and you take such and such." To house the children and students is a huge headache. Some of their parents start to create problems, others come to the harvest sick. Let them give us our tranches on time, and we ourselves will get people to pick the cotton. We don't need schoolchildren and students to do this work.

Living and Working Conditions during the Cotton Harvest

Aside from the coerced nature of the work, the other main problem that schoolchildren and their parents complain about is the horrendous conditions in which they live and work in the cotton fields. Here are several of the complaints we have received:

An eighth grade student from Kashkadaria province describes how she and her classmates were housed in the fields.

This year during the cotton harvest we lived in the fields in one room, more than 25 girls. There was not only no wash room, there wasn't even a decent toilet. The sink had water once every two days. There was no soap or even the elementary conditions to wash your hands or rinse off. Somehow we managed to sleep in the room which was crawling with fleas, bedbugs, cockroaches, ants and other insects. From morning to night we were in the fields and in the evening we collapsed from exhaustion.

Here is the account of a parent from Kashkadaria concerned with the health ramifications for her daughter of work in the fields:

The cotton harvest season takes place in the damp weather. The scratched up parts of their bodies are always prone to getting infected. Only with difficulty can I try to bring my two daughters' hands back in decent condition, using Vaseline and lotion. They are trying to earn money by picking cotton whatever the cost to them. Later on they will regret it. Regarding the slogan "golden hands bring forth white gold," I think that though the hands might be golden, I wouldn't call cotton gold. If the cotton doesn't serve to raise our standard of living, our wellbeing, then what good is it to us? That's not gold, it's a poison which is eating away at the roots of our families (September 20, 2007).

The farmers who make use of the children's labor often admit that they have no time or resources to devote to the children's health:

Each year when the schoolchildren come to pick cotton in my fields, I myself supply them with drinking water. Using special barrels for that purpose from the garage of the farming

association, I bring drinking water from the taps near the district center. In a few cases when there was no water in the pipes, I bring water from the irrigation canal that flows through the district. It's hard to say anything about the quality of that water. After all, I grew up on that water myself. And I'm healthy. However, the doctors from the Central Hospital are always saying that you at least need to chlorinate this water. But not everyone follows this recommendation, because we are sure that this water wouldn't poison anyone. A few doctors have said that from pollution or because the water itself is of low quality one can get kidney stones, or enlarged spleen or liver. There very well might be a dose of truth in this. As a farmer, it's my responsibility to fulfill the production quota and productivity of the harvest. Let their parents worry about the health of children (Farm director, Boevut district Syr Daria province, September 30, 2007).

One of the main problems is the poor diet supplied to the children. One children's nutrition specialist from Kashkadaria recounted the following:

All of what I'm going to tell you is unofficial, of course. Because forcing children to take part in the cotton harvest is against the law, the Ministry of Health gives instructions on the minimum daily rations for the children only orally, and in some cases these don't have the force of normal orders. The finance departments of local governments are supposed to set aside funds from their own budgets to feed the children taking part in mass "khashars." For instance, each child should receive 70 grams of meat or fish, and not less than 30 grams butter and 250 grams of bread or flour products. Taking into account that these are just the minimum levels, the farm administrations or schools should use their funds to fill out those rations.

But in practice the situation is the opposite. Children rarely if at all have any meat, eggs or milk to eat, and no one pays any attention to the quality of the food. An eighth grader from the Mirishkor district related the following:

At the end of September there was an outbreak of an epidemic at a poultry farm near where we were. Many of the birds had to be slaughtered, and they used them to feed us. At that time the pupils were very happy, because otherwise we got just some terrible soup with macaroni or something like that. We were sick to death of cabbage by the end.

Children are at great risk of injury, as they are transported out to the fields in wagons pulled by tractors, which is against all safety regulations. Another eighth grader from the Mirishkor district explained:

Every day at 7 in the morning we pupils gather in the schoolyard. After attendance, we were driven out to the fields in tractor wagons. Sometimes the farmers drive children in their cars, but this depends on the economic conditions of the farm. If the cotton field is nearby we can get their on foot. Everybody is brought out to the fields together.

Our investigation discovered one serious accident, when a tractor ran over a sleeping child:

I wouldn't say that my son became crippled due to cotton. I think that the tractor driver was unqualified, and there was an accident. Children are children, after all. It got a little warm out, and they got tired in the sun so they went to sleep in the field. That is what happened to my son. But the cistern in which the tractor driver was transporting water to the field rolled onto my son's leg. At first they said that the leg would be all right. The tractor driver compensated us by paying half the medical expense. But such is fate: my son became crippled. It's very hard for me so I'd rather not talk about it (cries). (Kashkadaria province, September 27, 2007).

Wages

Some segment of schoolchildren and their families benefit from the cotton harvest insofar as they earn money from it. But there are not many of these families, because often the money received is not enough to compensate damages to the health and education of children, and also to the family budget. A ninth-grader from the Kasb district explains:

Each year we're brought out to harvest cotton. We're used to it. Our fathers and elder brothers also harvested cotton. In general, it's the fate of all our countrymen. But the conditions there are inhuman, and the pay miserly. I don't know about others, but for one cotton season I earn about seventy to eighty thousand sum. This is not enough even to replace the clothes worn out during the campaign.

There is evidence that often children are not paid the full amount due to them. Their payment depends in part on the grade of cotton they pick, which is itself tied to the various stages that the harvest entails.

At the start of the cotton harvest season the government set the price for one harvested kilogram of 50 sum (4 US cents, author's note). However by the middle of the season the local administration lowered this to 40 sum, and by the end of the season, to 30. If on average a pupil receives 40 sum per kilogram, then on average he or she earns 1,200 sum (one US dollar). Over two months of harvesting that amount may grow to about 72,000 sum (58 US dollars). If one takes into account that students spend about 1,000 sum per day just on food, it follows that they are working in the fields practically for free. For instance, all of the textbooks required for seventh grade cost approximately 25,000 sum. A student will not even be able to buy their schoolbooks with the pure profit from their months of labor in the fields. In this sense the students are truly slaves. (Schoolteacher, Kashkadaria, September 17 2007).

It is clear that the cotton processing factories, according to testimony from an employee of "Kashkadariapahtasanoat" themselves sell 96% of their processed fiber as first sort. It turns out that someone is making a lot of money on the price scissors: the state pays the processing factories lower prices [as for inferior grades of cotton], which are passed on to those harvesting it.

Causes

What are the reasons for this massive exploitation of child labor? Those interviewed see the cause as the utter deterioration of the harvesting equipment under the current government. One farm worker from Nishan district put it thusly:

A long time ago I worked as a combine driver. In one season I could harvest over 300 tons of cotton. That's about as much as all of the children in our village gather over the whole season. Therefore I disagree absolutely with the view that without children's labor we couldn't bring in the cotton. They turn to children only because the agricultural industry in our country has totally collapsed, and there is basically no mechanization of farm work at all any more. With just one combine you can harvest as much cotton as all the children in a whole school. I don't know what the government is concerned with, but it's clear that you can't build a great future⁴ by forcing children to work (October 17, 2007).

One accountant from a collective farm agreed:

Backward and uneducated people are responsible for forcing children to harvest cotton. The farmers take on life-long debt just for the expenses associated with the children. At one time just on one collective farm there were more than a hundred combines, cotton harvesters and cotton plant cutters. Those times are long gone; everything has been stolen. And now we're dependent on little children to do the work.

Many tie the de-mechanization of agriculture to corruption at the highest levels of power:

At the present time not one of the ten mechanical harvesters we had in Soviet times is left. Almost all cotton is harvested by hand. Even the mechanical harvesters we have are not useable any more. The machines imported from America have been "sold."⁵ To resolve the overall problem will take a serious analysis of the mechanization problem. After all, farmers themselves also try to avoid any expenses acquiring machine harvesters (Former state farm chairman, Ok Altyn district, Syrdarya province).

Consequences

As noted above, despite the income it provides, the cost of participation in the cotton harvest for children's education and health makes it a loss making proposition. One mother of a girl involved in the harvest explained:

⁴ This is a reference to one of the Karimov government's early slogans after independence: "Uzbekistan — a future great state".

⁵ The subject refers to the government's purchase of cotton harvesters from the U.S. firm Case. *Shirkats* were forced to assume the cost of acquiring this very expensive machinery, which is part of the reason most of them have huge debts both to the state and to private banks, though they themselves were not consulted as to whether to acquire the harvesters or not.

My daughter is in the ninth grade, and my son in the seventh. Every year, both of them are sent by their schools out to pick cotton. Naturally, we don't object, because at least they can bring in a little money to help with the cost of their clothing, schoolbooks and supplies. However, I do object to sending girls who are close to being of age. After all, girls are not so suited to hard physical labor and to those terrible living conditions. Even if I allow my daughter to go out and pick cotton, she earns 100 thousand sum, but when I marry her off I'll have to pay 500 thousand just to treat her various ailments. But my husband has left to work in Russia, and that's why I agreed to let my daughter go. Otherwise, I would have gotten a medical certificate from the district hospital (October 1, 2007).

It is well known that cotton farming in Uzbekistan involves the intensive use of various agricultural chemicals. There are practically no studies done on the effects of these chemicals on children's health. Therefore it is necessary to rely on informed views and anecdotal evidence from relevant professionals. One specialist of an agrochemical firm in Kashkadaria gave this testimony:

In the last few years the productivity of the land in this district and overall in the province has dropped dramatically. The Karshi steppe that was first farmed in Soviet times is again slowly reverting back to steppe. It is as if the lands which were treated with such an excess of chemicals to raise their productivity are in a drugged state. And now chemical fertilizers are expensive. Just to get ordinary saltpeter you have to wait in lines for months at the "Navoiyot" plant or the Almalyk factory. I personally don't care how the chemicals affect children. Me, I'm constantly thinking about the productivity of the land, and the plan. If the plan is not fulfilled, then we'll be the guilty party, and the prosecutor will create a case and skin us alive. As a specialist I can tell you that the herbicides or saltpeter are not only harmful to children's organisms, but to adults too. That very saltpeter is one of the main catalysts of hepatitis C. (October 1, 2007)

Another specialist from an agrochemicals plant in Syrdaria province explained the situation differently:

Cotton only grows here thanks to treatment with mineral fertilizers and various chemicals. The irrigation drainage brings the remnants of these toxic substances into the groundwater. Cotton pickers are vulnerable to poisoning by these substances. Of course the toxins affect young children's growing bodies, when they are involved in plowing, harvesting cotton, or gathering the bushes from the fields. Especially in the Syr Daria steppe, which began to be intensively cultivated in Soviet times, the climatic and geographic conditions take a huge toll on people. At present, an enormous number of Syr Daria's children suffer from infectious diseases, as their immunity level is extremely low. (September 29, 2007).

Finally, a polyclinic doctor from Syr Daria province gave his view:

I was sent to Saikhunabad, Mirzachul and Syr Daria districts to examine children working on the cotton harvest. The children's condition is enough to drive one to tears. The start of the cotton campaign brings disease: whether common colds, or intestinal disorders, hepatitis, accidents, snakebite. Not one of the sick children receives the necessary medical attentions or medicines. If the poor child needs an operation, then he must be taken to the capital, to

Tashkent. In the districts there are neither medicines nor medical equipment. I've had to appeal to all kinds of government agencies...

An official from the state sanitary-epidemiological service of Syr Daria province gave some statistics for the district in which he serves:

In our district there continue to be cases of forced child labor. The sanitary-epidemiological conditions are, to a certain degree, dangerous. This year during the harvest season we registered cases of flu, chronic hepatitis and intestinal typhoid. Despite vaccinations and other preventive medical measures we registered 14 cases of hepatitis C, 10 typhoid cases and around 50 cases of flu. (November 1, 2007)

Extrapolating from these official statistics, keeping in mind that there are nine districts in the province then one can see that there are a great number of cases of hepatitis and typhoid, not to mention the long-lasting negative consequences for children's health from working on the harvest.

One teacher gave his impression of the negative consequences of forced child labor on the cotton harvest for education:

I'm sick and tired of hearing that 'teachers don't teach anymore.' The pupils themselves don't study anymore. During the cotton harvest alone the children aren't in the classroom for three months. It takes another month for them to get used to the rhythms of school. Finally, right before the end of the school year the children are again brought out for fieldwork.

Question: What do people have to say about this?

People have gotten used to it, and say things like "who is going to do the fieldwork if not children?" It is due to cotton that the whole school curriculum is destroyed. You don't know what to start with and where to end. There are other problems, too—there are few textbooks or teaching specialists, so the same teacher runs four different classes. I feel sorry for the children. They are growing up ignorant. I lived through the Soviet period, but I never witnessed a situation in which our own government is promoting illiteracy and ignorance (Syr Daria province, September 30 2007).

Due to the time spent in the cotton fields, rural schoolchildren, and provincial schoolchildren in general are at a great disadvantage compared with children from the major cities when it comes to college admissions. Parents often need to resort to bribes to have their children admitted, which raises the level of corruption in the education system. "And so what should we do? If a child from his very early years is shunted off to the cotton fields, and sees the example of his older brothers and sisters who get into university only with the help of bribes?" (Saikhunabad district resident).

Under these disadvantageous circumstances, rural children see little prospect of obtaining either a higher education or a good job and decent earnings. They therefore more and more often engage in migrant labor. A ninth grader in the Boevut district shared his plans:

This is my second year on the cotton harvest. There's no school anyway. The teachers are gone; there are no textbooks. All the schoolchildren are used to this state of affairs. So when the cotton harvest starts, they think well at least we can help our parents. I'm going off to Kazakhstan anyway, when I finish school. You can earn good money there.

--Have you been to Kazakhstan?

I haven't, but I've heard grownups talking about it. In my school many kids have the same goal—to finish school and to get out of the country (September 16, 2007).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The example of these two provinces shows that the use of forced child labor in Uzbekistan's cotton harvest is practiced on a massive scale. This practice violates Uzbekistan's own domestic law as well as its international human rights commitments. It deeply harms the country's children, poisons their futures, and in general damages the whole national interest, deepening the already existing corruption and de-modernization of the agricultural sector.

We call on the country's leadership to reconsider this practice and to carry out reforms in the cotton sector. These should include allowing farmers to decide labor questions on their own, for which they will need to be given full economic freedom within the bounds of a socially-oriented market economy. It is absolutely necessary to free the schools from the administrative fiat of local governments, and to cease using the schools as one link in the authoritarian chain to mobilize schoolchildren for agricultural work. In cases where they wish to carry out so-called internships and practical work, which, according to law, should not last more than 15 days, children need to be provided with all necessary conditions for safe work, including rest, adequate nutrition and medical care.

Uzbekistan should not only ratify the International Labor Organization's conventions 138 and 182, but carry out its international obligations. For our part, as human rights defenders, we stand ready to work with the government to document violations of these obligations and of our own domestic law.

Interviews transcripts

Kashkadaria Province

Schoolchildren

1. (names and locations omitted to protect identity of subjects)

Question: How many times does a child have to bend down, or how many bolls of cotton does he or she have to gather in order to make up one kilogram of cotton?

One cotton boll weighs about 8-10 grams. Therefore, in order to make up one kilo of cotton a kid has to bend down and bend back up again about one hundred times. So therefore, in order to pick 30 kilograms in a day you have to make about 2500 or 3000 such physical movements. If you consider how much energy that takes then you will see how difficult this work is. For the upperclassmen, this is like a form of exercise, however the poor ecological condition of the fields harms their health. It is for that reason they must stop forcing children to pick the cotton.

2.

Thankfully, the cotton fields are right next to our school. Our daily quota is a little less compared to other schools, so it's not bad. The reason is that our principal is an enterprising kind of guy—his brother is the head of the district education department. Last year a journalist from one of the newspapers came to visit us and promised to publish our picture in the paper. But later he explained to us that it turns out that it's not allowed to publish pictures of children picking cotton. He really got an earful from his boss, he said. His boss told him that our country's leaders are against children being made to go out and pick cotton.

3.

When I was admitted to this [specialized technical] school, my father paid big money so that I wouldn't have to go out and pick cotton. But hey, when it comes to cotton, everyone is equal. Therefore, I was sent out to the fields anyway. They told him let her pick a little cotton just for a month or so, otherwise the other students will start to talk and raise a fuss. It's not a big deal to pick cotton, but the conditions there are intolerable—there's no drinking water, no electricity. When I told my father about how we have to live out there he said, "You'll have to bear with it, my dear. Otherwise I'll be fired. You know that it's no simple feat to get a job in the tax inspectorate."

4. First year university student

This year we were brought out to pick cotton in the Kasb district. They had just whitewashed the field sheds, so the living conditions weren't the worst. But we really suffered from the lack of drinking water, the food, and especially the lack of electricity. If there was light one day, then there wasn't any the next. We got no meat, no high-calorie foods whatsoever. A lot of the girls got sick and went home. Our professors like to tell us that our student years are the best of our lives, and that when we grow up we'll look back fondly on these times. I'd like to know though can it really be true that each citizen of our republic has to go through this hellish torture?

5. Specialized technical high school student

My school closes for five months of the year: In the fall, three months for the harvest, in the winter, for one month because the building is not heated, and another month in the spring for field work and weeding. What do you think our level of knowledge is, when we spend half the academic year in the fields? We too want to believe the fancy slogans we hear on the radio and read in the papers. But why should we deceive ourselves, if our whole lives are spent hungry and we're nothing more than cotton slaves?

6. Male student, professional junior college

There are about 500 students in my school, and most of them will associate their student years with hard labor in the cotton fields, and the inhumane living conditions in the field sheds. Naturally, the student who doesn't go out to pick cotton won't remain a student for long. There aren't even adequate conditions for us guys, not to speak of the girls. There's no place to wash, no doctors. If one of the girls gets really sick she goes home, but if one of the boys falls ill, then he has to suffer right here. Moreover, they say that if we pick less than 70 kilograms per day, we'll have to pay for our own room and board. Each year after the harvest season the girls have to spend two or three weeks healing their hands, coarsened and roughed up picking cotton. When I see the watery eyes and wind-burned faces of my classmates, I feel like setting the cotton fields aflame.

7. Male student, specialized technical junior college.

They don't grow cotton in our district. That's why each year they send us out to the neighboring Kamashin district. The director of our school is a relative of one of the local bigwigs. So at least we get our pay on time. My older brothers have gone off to work in Russia so I'm the only man in the house. That's why I pick my weekly quota in four or five days and on the weekend I get to go home. For the last two years at least we get our pay on time. I've heard that in Kazakhstan they pay cotton pickers many times more. Why couldn't they do that here?

8. Female ninth grader

They bring us out to pick cotton every year. We're used to it. Our fathers and elder brothers also picked cotton. I guess that's the fate of all our countrymen. But the conditions for cotton pickers are really inhumane and the pay is miserly. For instance, I earn only 70-80 thousand sum for the whole season, not even enough to replace the clothes that wear out

during the cotton campaign. Is there really any difference between our living conditions and our food and those of the spindly half dead Afghan children they show us on television?

9. Schoolboy

I feel anxious when autumn comes—where are they going to send us this year to pick cotton? Last year they sent us to Kasb district, and there was neither decent food nor drinking water. They brought us canal water in flasks, or we drank water that had been in sitting in tanks for ten days. In our own district cotton doesn't grow. That's probably why our students don't know how to pick it very well. The pay they give you doesn't even cover your expenses. I don't get just one thing: all of the schoolchildren from our district gather as much cotton as one combine can gather. Why then doesn't our country use combines? Who is it who wants to deprive us of the chance to study and learn?

10. Male ninth grader

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 moreover, the only way to get cash is to go out and pick cotton.⁶ It's painful to see how the kids knock themselves out in the cotton fields to earn this to earn this rotten money. Just think about it: in order to earn 50 sum, a kid who is barely 14 has to bend down to the cotton bush over fifty times. And his earnings from a day of this work won't even buy him a pair of ugly socks.



11. Male ninth grader

Question: are there students who don't have to go out and pick cotton?

I've been out picking cotton four years, but I don't know of any cases where anyone is not obligated to go. However, sometimes kids' parents try to get them medical certificates or other documents attesting to their poor health. Under those circumstances a few kids have been partially freed from going out. But there are very few of those: in one grade level you can only find one or two of them. I'm only talking about students higher than the fifth grade.

12. Male eighth grader

Question: how do they bring children out to the fields?

⁶ Uzbekistan's monetary policy includes draconian limits on the emissions of currency; individuals and enterprises do not have free access to monies they may have in accounts, and salaries are paid often with huge delays due to the lack of access to cash (ed. Note).

Every day at 7 am the pupils gather in the schoolyard. After attendance we are driven out to the fields in a wagon hooked up to a tractor. Sometimes the farmers drive us out in their cars, but that depends on how prosperous the farmer is. If the cotton fields are nearby, then we can walk. Everybody goes out to the fields together. It can be cold in the morning. Especially the last few years, everyone tries not to go out to the fields the last few days of the season [when it is especially cold].

13. Male ninth grader

Question: how many kids have to eat lunch right out in the fields?

My class has thirty students; there are the same number of students in our partner class. The students in the younger classes have lunch at home because they come out to the fields after their lessons. If you take into account that our school goes up to the ninth grade, and the seventh through ninth grades there are seven classes, then you can see that there are about 200 children who eat out in the fields. Once in a while the farmer organizes lunch for us. But most of the time we eat what we've managed to bring from home. Sometimes, when it's very cold, we work up until lunch time and then they let us go home.

14. Male seventh grader

What kinds of problems do the youngest children have out in the fields?

The main problems for the younger children are their weak hands and tender skin. When a cotton picker takes a boll, the sharp edge of the pod scratches his hands. In the damp autumn weather these scratches turn into seeping infected wounds. There is another problem in that it's hard for the young kids to bring all the cotton they've picked to the weighing station. Sometime's it's even too heavy for them to lift. Therefore we always try to help them, and also to help make sure they hit their daily picking targets. It's also not incidental that they're brought out to the fields in tractor wagons. They require constant supervision. And heaven forbid if someone should let their attention flag for one minute, someone might have an accident. There are cases when in the warm weather kids fall asleep in the fields.

15. Male junior professional college student

In the words of our international law teacher, our country has ratified the convention against child labor. But despite this they continue to make schoolchildren go out and harvest cotton. The students of our college protested about this in writing to several government agencies. But we never received one answer with any commentary on the use of child labor. They try to pretend that the pupils themselves voluntarily want to do it. However, just try to "voluntarily" refuse! Therefore, we're all required to follow this unwritten law.

16. Male eighth grader

Question: how would you describe the building in which you live during the cotton harvest?

This season we lived in a field shed which was located in the upper part of one of the cotton fields and consisted of nine rooms of varying sizes. The room I lived in was six meters long by four meters wide. Nineteen of us lived in there. Since there were no beds or mattresses, we slept on the earthen floor. It was pretty damp in the room and so lots of the guys caught cold. We brought blankets and other bedding from home. Right before we arrived they whitewashed the walls, so for a few days it was quite hard to breathe in there. But we got used to it. Right next to the shed there was one of the large irrigation canals. That's where we got our water. Our "cook," whom we chose from our ranks, made our meals. Every day there was one of us who got diarrhea, or some illness that made him terribly weak. In general we just barely lived through the experience somehow. And the money that we earned didn't even cover what we spent during the whole cotton harvest campaign.

17. Female eighth grader

Question: in the field sheds were there any separate washrooms or medical facilities for girls?

This year during the cotton harvest season there were twenty five of us girls in one of the rooms in the field shed. Not only were there no separate wash rooms for girls, there weren't even any normal toilets. There was water only once every two days, and no soap or any other supplies for basic hygiene. Somehow we managed to sleep in the room that was teeming with fleas, bedbugs, cockroaches, ants and other biting insects. From morning to night we were out in the fields, and in the evening we came in and dropped from exhaustion. At the beginning of November we went back to school. Thank God we came back without any illnesses or problems. After I finish my nine years of primary education, I'm not going to continue in school. Or rather, I want to learn sewing at the trade school that's just opened up in the district center.

18. Female ninth grader

Question: When they bring you out to the cotton fields, do they ask the permission of your parents?

At the beginning of the cotton season they announce that school is closed, and that's that. All right-thinking parents understand what that means. Therefore, no parents who want their children to continue to go to school would ever object, although no one ever asks for their permission. If you ask any of the parents about this they will just laugh at you, 'what do you mean, permission, what agreement or contract?' Cotton—that's all that needs to be said. The school is closed, everybody is out in the fields picking. Even on the government buildings you'll see big placards, "Everybody out to the cotton harvest!" All of the students or schoolchildren who are at least half healthy have to be out in the fields. It gets to the point where the traffic police will even stop busses and cars traveling toward the district or provincial centers and force all the passengers who are not invalids or sick out to pick cotton.

19. Male eighth grader

Question: How many times during this cotton season did you eat anything that you liked?

At the end of September there was an outbreak of an epidemic on the poultry farm that was right next to where we were. So they had to slaughter some of the birds. And they used them to make us various meals. That made all the kids really happy. Otherwise it was only tasteless soup with macaroni or something like that. By the end just the sight of cabbage made us sick. We yearned for anything like milk, or sour milk. There were enough melons, though. Every farmer grows melons. So they gave us melons or watermelon often—for lunch, for dinner. On the days when they didn't give us hot food we stuffed our stomachs with tomatoes from the vine, melons and watermelons.

20. Female seventh grader

Question: How were the showers out in the fields?

We spent two weeks out in the field shed on the territory of the farm. One half of the shed was filled with college students, the other half with us, school kids. There were no showers. Across from the shed there were so-called "wash basins," made up empty plastic bottles. A little farther away there were "showers," separated off by a canvas. The water in these "showers" wasn't changed for two weeks so no one went there. The boys washed further down, right in the irrigation ditch, and the girls were allowed to go home once a week, in the center of the farm. Since after two weeks there were quite a lot of participants in this "khashar," we started to come out to the fields from our homes every day. During the harvest season the female college students told us that there still were no showers, and that they got their drinking water from the nearby irrigation canal. Sometimes we asked them to bring us clean drinking water from the tap from their homes.



21. Male eighth grader

Question: did it get to the point during the cotton harvest season that you had to pick up the dirty cotton lint (after-harvest) for the ginning and special receiving stations?

In two of the sections of our farm the cotton was machine harvested. They sent the students of our school out to one of those sections to gather what remained after the combine harvest. Each kilogram of that cotton was worth 15-20 sum. In comparison with the quotas for clean cotton, the daily norm was raised from two to two-and-a-half times. They paid us for this cotton on the eve of Constitution Day. In fact, adult pickers, or at the very least, college students should have picked this cotton, because the schoolchildren's hands got so cut up by the cotton plants. Their faces were also scratched by the branches and cracked from the cold. But nevertheless, we fulfilled the plan. A day or two after the district fulfilled its cotton plan, we were allowed to go home, and school began again.

22. Female eighth grader

Each year we anxiously await the beginning of the cotton harvest. The reason is that there is no other way to earn cash. Yes, some people say that it's bad that students are out in the cotton fields, that they shouldn't have to go, and that they should be in school. But when there is no school, when there are no textbooks, then it is better, naturally, to go out to pick cotton. There at least you can help your parents a little. I'm only sorry that they pay so little. For instance, for all the money I earned during the whole season, I can afford only to buy a school uniform.

23. Male ninth grader

Question: How many years have you been coming out to the cotton harvest?

I've been picking cotton now every year for four years. When they send us out, they don't show us any order or any other document. We go out based on the oral orders or direction of our principal or the head of the local education department. The upperclassmen are housed out in the fields in sheds and barracks, while the pupils from the younger classes are brought out into the fields in wagons pulled by tractors. We eat for lunch what we have brought out on the edge of the fields. We're paid by our teachers once every two weeks or ten days. Otherwise, she raises a fuss with the collective farm administration, or with the private farmer (September 30, 2007).

24. Female ninth grader

I've been coming out to harvest cotton for several years. Sure, the pay for each kilogram we pick is very low. However, one can only earn cash during the cotton harvest. Everyone is obligated to go, starting in the fifth grade. If someone refuses, then he will have problems during the school year. It's an unwritten law that obligates us to go out and pick cotton. During the cotton harvest campaign the upper classmen are housed in field sheds. Conditions are terrible: no drinking water, and no meat, milk or eggs in their meals. (September 29, 2007).

25. Male sixth-grader

I came out for the cotton harvest for the first time this year. There's a lot of cotton, so it's not hard to meet daily quotas. I'm out picking cotton, and so is my sister. My dad says that if I do a good job, I can use the money I earn to buy textbooks. But I want to buy a bicycle instead. What do I need textbooks for, if in school and even in college they bring you out to pick cotton all the time? A bicycle is more useful, because then I can ride it out to the cotton fields instead of walking. Last year, my classmate Atkham was on his way to the fields when he fell under a tractor wheel and was killed. After that I am really afraid of riding to the fields on a tractor wagon (September 29, 2007).

26. Female eighth grader

How much do you earn during the harvest season?

We have a daily quota for our class of 40 kilograms. A pupil who meets that target for the day will earn two thousand sum. They pay us once every ten or fifteen days. The cashier,

who has a tough time getting cash for us, holds back ten percent of each person's pay. I exceed the daily norm and often gather more than 50 kilograms. Therefore, after taking out what the farm withholds, I earn on average two thousand sum a day, or one hundred thousand sum over the whole season. That is enough to buy schoolbooks and some clothes.

27. Female ninth grader

Question: If you don't want to, then don't answer. But how do you, as a young girl, deal with the problem that you face every month? How about your friends?

It will be better if I talk about my friends. For instance, the women teachers at our school allow the girls who have painful periods to go home for a few days. However, many girls are ashamed and will not talk about this. As a result, after the cotton harvest season is over many of them have various illnesses, and some even have to go for treatment to the hospital. For this reason, I should mention, the local clinic gynecologist gives a talk every year about how one shouldn't be ashamed and that this is a natural occurrence that happens to every girl as she comes of age. (October 13, 2007).

28. Male seventh grader



Question: Can you say anything about the quality of the food that you're given during the cotton harvest?

This is my second year going out to pick cotton. Last year, our lunches had everything except meat. This year we have to bring our own lunches from home, and if we're picking cotton not far from home we can go there for lunch. About the quality of the food, well, it's normal food: soup with noodles, sometimes plov...We're not too picky about the food. We can even gather our daily quota without having lunch. Then we go home and fill up on home cooking. So I can't really say anything about the quality of the food. (October 13, 2007)

29. Male junior college student

Once I fell asleep in the cotton field, and a tractor ran over my leg. I had medical treatment later. My college helped me, and sent me to Tashkent for treatment. Now my parents get assistance from our village council due to me. When the tractor crushed my leg everyone panicked. The policemen really tortured the poor tractor driver, they totally fleeced him, forcing him even to sell his property [in order to pay bribes to the police officials to avoid a jail term, not to pay compensation to the victim. Ed. Note] (October 1, 2007).

Parent interviews

1. Father of a seventh grade boy

Question: Do you support children's participation in the cotton harvest?

In this situation no one asks for the agreement of parents or family elders to send children out to pick cotton. Maybe some parents try to get their kids out of it, and maybe somebody succeeds. But there are very few of these cases. The majority of parents just don't consider trying to get their children out of the cotton harvest. Because we all know, including parents, that cotton is our government's policy, and therefore we are obligated to pick cotton. We, the parents, picked it during our own school days. Now our children have to do it. If this government remains, then my grandchildren will have to do it too. In such circumstances it would be ludicrous to ask someone's permission for their children to go out to the cotton fields. However it should be noted that many are not in agreement with this policy. They silently suffer from the knowledge that there is no way out. (October 10, 2007).

2. Mother of two

Question: Do you support your children's participation in the cotton harvest?

I have a daughter in the ninth grade and a son in the seventh. Every year they are taken out of school to pick cotton. Naturally, I'm not against this, because at least they can earn enough money for their school supplies and uniforms. However I'm against sending out girls who are nearly of age. After all, girls are not really suited to hard physical labor and poor living conditions. If I allow my daughter to go out now and she earns one hundred thousand sum, I'm going to have to pay five hundred thousand sum later for medical treatment when it is time for her to get married. [But] my husband has gone to Russia as a migrant laborer. Therefore I have agreed to let my daughter go out. Otherwise I would have gotten her a certificate freeing her from the harvest at the district hospital (October 1, 2007).

3. Mother

Question: They tell me that your child had an accident during the cotton season and was crippled...

I don't believe that my son became crippled due to cotton. I think the tractor driver was unqualified, and there was an accident. Children are children, after all. It was warm, and the sun made him drowsy, so he fell asleep in the field. This is what happened to my son. The water tank ran over one of his legs, the tank that the tractor driver was bringing to the fields for the children. First they told me that his leg would get better. Half the medical expenses were covered by the tractor driver. But such is fate—my son was crippled. It is hard for me so I don't want to talk about it [cries]. (September 27, 2007)

4. Father

Question: Have you ever expressed opposition to the children's obligation to work on the harvest?

You raise an interesting question. But to whom should we complain, if the government itself sends the children out to the harvest? Many people say that President Karimov himself

doesn't know about this. But those people, sadly, just don't listen to the radio, especially Radio Liberty. Many of them don't know that Karimov himself gives the order to send the children out to the fields to pick cotton. Therefore, a few parents raise a fuss so that their children won't have to go, and some give presents to the teachers but it's all useless. Cotton—this is the policy, the categorical decision of our government. That's why any complaint never escapes the confines of the village, district or province. (October 2, 2007).

5. Mother of two daughters

Question: In Soviet times there was a popular slogan "golden hands make the white gold." What do you think—do your daughters hands look golden to you all scratched by the cotton pods?

By the time of the cotton harvest the weather is already damp. Scratches quickly get infected. Only with difficulty can I make my daughters' torn-up hands presentable again using Vaseline, hand cream. They don't think of themselves, just to try to earn some money. After a while they'll regret it. With regard to that slogan, "golden hands create the white gold," I'd say that while the hands may be golden, cotton certainly isn't gold for us. If it doesn't increase our wellbeing, or improve our living conditions, it's no kind of gold to us. This isn't gold, it's a poison, corroding the lives of our sons and daughters. (September 20, 2007).

6. Father

Question: Villagers say that if the cotton plan is not met, then it spoils everyone's mood, even the children's. How true is this?

Of course when the plan is fulfilled everyone is in a good mood. The children come back early from the fields. The *khokimiat* won't look at us like we're guilty of something. And if the cotton harvest targets are not met, then the adults certainly are out of sorts. They take out their discontent on their families. And it's hard for the children, too. Fulfilling the plan makes everyone happier. Especially, children are concerned about when the targets will be met. After all, when the plan is fulfilled, both adults and children can rest easy. (September 27, 2007).

7. Father

Question: What benefit does the government gain from your children's labor?

The benefit accrues to the people, not to the government, because cotton is our national wealth. The more we preserve the cotton during the harvest, the greater wealth there is for the people. After all, our government keeps the peace, and this costs money. Therefore, our children are serving the Motherland, and the cause of peace. I am absolutely in support of the children's participation in the cotton harvest. I think they should go to school in the summer so that they would have the fall free for the cotton season. (October 20, 2007)

8. Father

Question: Do you think that the cotton will go unpicked if there are no children to harvest it? A long time ago I worked as a combine driver. In one season I harvested more than 300 tons of cotton. That's approximately as much as all the children in our village gather in a season. Therefore I really disagree with the view that there will be no one to harvest the cotton. It's only because the local system of agribusiness is totally on its knees that they turn to the children to help. If there were enough harvesters we could bring in as much cotton as a whole school. I don't know what the government is thinking about. But I do know that this is no way to build "a great future," forcing children out to work.⁷

Teacher interviews

1. Male Schoolteacher

Question: How many children in your school are brought out to harvest cotton?

Our school is one of the biggest in the district. In both shifts, the school has about 844 students. 400 of these are students in the fifth grade and up. All of them are brought out to the fields for the harvest. In the fifth through seventh grades, they are under the special supervision of teachers. For the most part they go out to the fields after school is over, or after a truncated school day. During the cotton harvest, therefore, there are about 390-400 students from our school out picking. It is obligatory for everyone. Not one of our students should remain on the sidelines.

2. Female schoolteacher

Question: what proportion of all the cotton harvested in the district is brought in by schoolchildren?

Our school has 799 students. If you consider that about half of them go out to the harvest, then that's 400 pairs of hands picking cotton. Their daily quotas, taking into consideration that the upperclassmen have to pick more average out to be 30 kilograms. So if all of them hit their targets, that adds up to 12 tonnes per day. The season lasts two months, approximately, so over the whole season they pick up to 700 tons. So, if each of the 65 schools in our district takes in 700 tons, then you see that over all, schoolchildren pick over 47 thousand tons of cotton in a season. (September 25, 2007)

3. Male schoolteacher

Question: How much does each household gain from the schoolchildren's participation in the cotton harvest?

At the beginning of the cotton season the government sets a price for each kilogram of cotton picked at 50 sum (.04 USD, author's note). However by mid season the local government administration had lowered that price to 40 sum and by the end of the season

⁷ A reference to a slogan from the early Karimov years, "Uzbekistan is a future great state."

to 30 sum. If the children receive 40 sum on average for each kilogram they pick, then in a day they might make 1200 sum (1 US dollar). And so over the course of a two-month season they would earn 72,000 sum (58 USD). If you take into account the amount the students spend per day on food, approximately 1,000 sum, then you see that they are working essentially for free. For instance, the seventh grade textbooks all together cost about 25,000 sum. With the pure profit from their work over the whole season students can't even buy their textbooks. In that sense you really can call them slaves. (September 17, 2007).

4. Male schoolteacher

Question: How long does the cotton harvest last?

Each year our school closes on the eve of September 10, in other words, ten days after the start of the school year. This is determined in part by how hot the summer was and how quickly the cotton has matured. The end of the season, however, is determined only by the fulfillment of the plan in the district, the province and the republic. For example, if our district and province meets its plan targets a little early, let's say in October, then we are no longer required to go out and pick cotton. In other words, if students are out in the fields after that point they are doing it just to earn money. But if the plan is not fulfilled then it can be December, and the cold weather is here already, and we are still obligated to be out in the fields. No one can protest this state of affairs. Therefore you really don't know ahead of time how long the season will last. This year it was from September 10 to November 10. (September 18, 2007).

5. District education department inspector

I am against schoolgirls going out to the fields. It violates any standards whatsoever for girls to spend a long time out in the fields, living in sheds without water or gas. I've seen plenty of cases while working in the department of girls who have gotten severe colds while out picking cotton, and had to undergo medical treatment. A few even became critically ill. After all, in the near future these girls will become mothers. As far as the boys are concerned, there is not anything too awful about them helping their parents. That is their duty, after all.

6. Male schoolteacher

Question: Do the children have enough food allotted to them over the course of the season?

Our school is not allotted any foodstuffs for our children out on the harvest because the children themselves bring their own supplies from home. However, the farms supply food for the university and college students taking part in the cotton harvest, who live out in the field sheds or barracks. Our school administration bought 35 kilos of meat for the assistants who are taking part in the harvest. Other foodstuffs, such as noodles, oil and bread were bought by the farm. They [students and others provided food by the farms] eat better than we do. According to the students, they always get meat in their food, even if it's only a little. Representatives of the central district hospital and sanitary-epidemiological station and even the prosecutor's office come out to make sure they are getting their allotted rations.

7. Male schoolteacher

Question: Are there children who go out to pick cotton voluntarily?

Of course, there are quite a lot of pupils who go out voluntarily because in today's conditions of unemployment and total poverty even children at a very tender age feel the desire to somehow help their families and their parents. About ten percent of children go out to pick cotton voluntarily, with this goal in mind. These children tend to pick more than the daily norms to earn a bit of money. In addition, there are those children who come out to earn enough to buy their own clothes and textbooks. These children are a good example for the others. (September 12, 2007).

8. Male schoolteacher

Question: Under what circumstances do children refuse to go out and pick cotton? What measures are taken against these "mutineers"?

I've been teaching for twenty five years, and all that time I've taken children out to the cotton fields. Lately, our principal has been stating that the local prosecutor's office is responsible for monitoring the obligatory service of children in the fields. That's why any refusal to pick cotton is punished so severely. But of course there are also those children whose parents get them false medical certificates to excuse them from cotton picking. Not every doctor is authorized to issue these. I have witnessed cases of children being expelled for refusing to go out, but in 2007 there weren't any such cases. (September 12, 2007).

9. Male schoolteacher

Question: What safety measures are taken during the harvest to protect children from accidents?

Children are children. You can never totally protect them from danger. That's why they have to be constantly monitored. During the cotton harvest I can remember cases where children were smothered by the cotton they gathered, or were run over by tractors when they were sleeping in the fields. Unfortunately, due to our national character, whether it is out of carelessness, excessive good-heartedness, or fear, those responsible for these accidents are often forgiven. The press doesn't write about these incidents nor are they shown on television. For instance, I know of a case when six young girls who went off to wash [in a river or canal] were swept away by the current. The prosecutor's office even opened a criminal case on the matter, but later they put the brakes on it and it never went anywhere. I think that any person responsible for a child's accident should bear responsibility, and that these incidents should not be hushed up. (September 19, 2007).

Farm worker interviews

1. *Shirkat* chairman

The times are long past when pupils would get poisoned out working on the [chemical] defoliation, or got sick with various infectious diseases. Those days are gone. Now, after independence, we can't even get such "poisons" anymore [as their prices have rocketed up – author's note]. As an expert I really cannot understand why they force children out to the cotton fields. After all, dozens of schoolchildren can't gather as much cotton as one combine. Instead of using child labor out in the fields we have to work on greater mechanization of agriculture.

1. A. Collective farm accountant

Ignorant and backward people are responsible for forcing children out into the cotton fields. Farmers go into debt for the rest of their lives just to pay for the children's expenses. Before, just one collective farm had almost one hundred combines and pieces of farm machinery. But that was ages ago—everything was stolen. And so we have to pin all our hopes on little children.

2. Village surveyor

I'm grief-stricken when I see little children walking along the dusty road to the cotton fields. They should be in school. What sort of a future will they have—they haven't seen anything of life, and they're out there picking cotton. They don't even wear clothing made of cotton, just cheap synthetics from China! This illiterate, abandoned generation—do you think they're going to build the great future Karimov talks about? I've no one to talk with about this, no one to share my grief. Can you write about this somewhere, in a newspaper?

3. Farm director

Of course there are accidents when children are out picking cotton. Most of the accidents that people learn about really aren't discussed much. Most of the time, the police don't become involved. This is because villagers forgive each other, so the family or the mahalla discuss the cases and that is that. For instance, last year one of our tractor drivers killed his neighbor's daughter, a little third grader, when the wagon full of cotton he was pulling turned over. This year, two children in the older grades were trying to earn money from scrap metal, and were electrocuted when they tried to cut a cotton pipe running through the fields. Such accidents happen all too often. And we rural people are used to it. (September 17, 2007).

4. Farmer

I'm grateful to our local teachers, who stand out in the fields and take charge of the children. I gave the teachers a big party. That's why I met my quotas after the first pass through the fields. The pupils, too, were not demanding either: they brought their own bread for lunch, and drank the canal water. I'm grateful to them. If I had to rely on the government, the cotton would still be in the fields. (September 25, 2007).

5. Cotton receiving station worker

We asked a few of the pupils to come help us in making the bales of cotton (packing it up for transport). They were goofing around and one of them got caught in the conveyor belt and was crippled. We were obligated to pay for his medical care because his parents turned out to be poor. The prosecutor insisted that our receiving station pay for his care. Of course, packing up the cotton is not work for children; adults should be doing it. But what are you going to do—all the adults have left to work in Russia. (October 11, 2007).

6. Machine-tractor station worker

I don't know how it works at other stations, but we follow procedures strictly. We only use passenger vehicles to transport the children to pick cotton in the neighboring district, and happily we have not had any accidents. We are responsible for transporting cotton pickers in busses, cars and tractors. Everything is working fine. Whatever happens in the fields themselves is not our responsibility. We are entrusted with getting the children to the fields, and that is what we do. [REPEATED BY MESTNOE NASELENIE interview below] Each season I keep a record of all the schoolchildren, college students and others who are working on the harvest. I am responsible for bringing them drinking water and for creating good conditions for them. This is our life. In Soviet times all the cotton was taken by Moscow, but now it's all for us. But despite this, we still don't have enough cotton seed oil or household soap. We are grateful to our President, but the people around him are bad. It is they who force the schoolchildren out to pick cotton. (October 11, 2007).

7. Farm director

Question: In Soviet times, there were cases of mass poisonings and hepatitis outbreaks after the fields were treated with chemical defoliants. How do things stand with this now?

I am a farm director, so I know that in the first years of independence there were cases where children and adults were poisoned by defoliants, and outbreaks of viral hepatitis. However in the last few years, not only in Syr Daria province but throughout the republic, farm mechanization has declined to a sorry state. There are very few tractors or combine harvesters. As a result, there is no need to take off the leaves of the cotton plants to prepare them for machine harvesting. Despite the fact that the price of cotton is rising, we continue to pick most of it by hand. Therefore, there are practically no cases in which the children are poisoned with defoliants or other toxic chemicals. However their health does suffer from the lack of drinking water, the poor living conditions, and lack of nutritious food. (September 16, 2007).

Agronomist and agrochemical specialist interviews

1. Official, regional cotton corporation

Question: Does your company make use of scientific and technological advances?

Our province has 13 of the republic's 128 cotton processing factories. All of these factories process the cotton seed to prepare it for sowing. Ninety-six per cent of the cotton sown in the province is of the highest grade. Eighty-five per cent of our harvest comes from private farms. Overall we have 167 thousand hectares of land in our provinces farms. The 12,951 private farms on our territory have land amounting to 136,500 hectares. Our province also has a branch of the "Sifat" organization, which coordinates standards for the different varieties of cotton. The center has HVI equipment, which uses American technology. It can analyze the length, smoothness, strength and other qualities of the cotton fiber. Our processing factories have up to date equipment, including models 30VP, ChKh-3M, 6A-12M and ROV brand cotton fiber regenerators.

2. Agronomist for a farmer's association

Question: Have you witnessed children being poisoned in the fields? Give examples from the 2007 season.

I've been working as an agronomist for several years. It's not just in 2007, but over the last few years there have been cases of poisoning with defoliants, weed-killers, saltpeter and ammoniac. The problem is that in the entire Kashkadaria province, cotton is harvested by machine in only one farm: in Zheinov village, Kasb district. Therefore, that farm requires the use of chemical defoliants before the bushes are harvested by machine. Other farms don't require chemical treatments because all of the harvest is gathered by hand. There is no need to take the leaves off the plants. Therefore in recent times, chemical defoliants, which are expensive, are not much in use. Not just in our farm but in the whole district, there have been no cases of poisoning, with the exception of a few incidents where insecticides were used to treat the cotton pods.

3. Agrochemical complex specialist

Question: Tell us about the role of chemical fertilizers in raising cotton productivity. Aren't those chemicals harmful to children who pick the cotton?

In the last few years the productivity of the land in this district and overall in the province has dropped dramatically. The Karshi steppe that was first farmed in Soviet times is again slowly reverting back to steppe. It is as if the lands which were treated with such an excess of chemicals to raise their productivity are in a drugged state. And now chemical fertilizers are expensive. Just to get ordinary saltpeter you have to wait in lines for months at the "Navoiyazot" plant or the Almalyk factory. I personally don't care how the chemicals affect children. Me, I'm constantly thinking about the productivity of the land, and the plan. If the plan is not fulfilled, then we'll be the guilty party, and the prosecutor will create a case and skin us alive. As a specialist I can tell you that the herbicides or saltpeter are not only harmful to children's organisms, but to adults too. That very saltpeter is one of the main catalysts of hepatitis C. (October 1, 2007)

Healthcare worker interviews

1. Nurse, village outpatient clinic

Each year the district health department sends us out to pick cotton. I understand that cotton is our national wealth and state policy. But chasing children out to pick cotton is a policy of very short-sighted people. Most of the adolescents we see in our clinic, especially girls, have lost their health due to cotton. Now they have to be out of their homes picking cotton, living in sheds without gas or water? The results are lamentable.

2. Doctor, provincial sanitary-epidemiological station

Question: What rules are set by district doctors during the time children are sent out to pick cotton?

Here we need to note the concrete functions of hospitals and other medical institutions that constitute part of the state SES and public health administration. Our organization, the state SES, is responsible for the observation of basic hygiene and sanitation in the locations where the children pick cotton. Therefore, our department doctors are tasked with monitoring the situation. It is for that reason that they constantly monitor the fall weather and the sanitation situation in the fields, as well how well the rules of hygiene are followed in the field sheds. The first obligation of our doctors is of course to be professional, to use their experience and knowledge of rural conditions, and to be able to get along with people. Specialists who fulfill these conditions are allowed to take part in the mass “khashars” or other mass undertakings involved in the cotton harvest (October 17, 2007).

3. Provincial child nutrition specialist

All of what I’m going to tell you is unofficial, of course. Because forcing children to take part in the cotton harvest is against the law, the Ministry of Health gives instructions on the minimum daily rations for the children only orally, and in some cases these don’t have the force of normal orders. The finance departments of local governments are supposed to set aside funds from their own budgets to feed the children taking part in mass “khashars.” For instance, each child should receive 70 grams of meat or fish, and not less than 30 grams butter and 250 grams of bread or flour products. Taking into account that these are just the minimum levels, the farm administrations or schools should use their funds to fill out those rations. Because for the last few years it has become more common for schoolchildren to remain at home while picking cotton, in other words, without being housed in the fields, their nutrition is more and more the responsibility of their parents. We make sure that all of the foodstuffs bought with state monies reach their intended recipients.

Interviews with the local population

1. Village police officer

I understand why they make children go out and harvest cotton, but why bother us with this? They say that it’s because the children run away, or cause mischief. But where are

they going to run from cotton? At home, at school, all our lives are dominated by cotton. After all, there is the district education department whose responsibility it is to hold them accountable, shame them in public opinion and expel them from school if they don't pick cotton. What business is this of ours? I'm not happy with this state of affairs.

2. Village market director

We get really busy as soon as the cotton season starts. A few of us contributed money and got permission to work selling during the day. On the cotton fields next to us one of the students lit a cigarette and all the fields went up in flames. They blamed us, the market traders. Our market was closed. If they bring schoolchildren out to the fields, it's the teachers who should look after them. I don't get what we have to do with it. And in general, why should children be out in the fields anyway? Let their parents who go off to Russia to work bring their kids with them: there the pay is higher and living conditions are better.

3. Field shed security guard

I'm a simple collective farm worker, but I understand things that our government really ought to be thinking of. Take for instance the practice of sending children out to the fields to harvest cotton. People say that it will go unpicked if the children don't do it. But it's not that way at all: there are plenty of people to harvest it. The only explanation for this is that our leaders got used to it during Soviet times, and in their Soviet upbringing. They're used to it. Therefore they automatically think of child and student labor when it comes to the cotton harvest. If we could only explain to them that times have changed, and that there exists modern agricultural technology and the means to mechanize the harvest, to automate production! But these people have it all backwards. (September 20, 2007).

4. District government personnel office worker

I went out to pick cotton during my school years. Now my children also take part in the cotton campaign. It's our duty to pick cotton, as cotton is our national wealth. But it's very aggravating that in the 21st century most of our cotton remains picked by hand, especially by students and schoolchildren. It makes me sad to see how poorly they're dressed when they're out in the fields—they remind me of the African children we see on television. And if you could see the conditions in which they're housed out in the fields, then you'd want to spit on the government that has allowed such outrages, and on its 'great future.' (September 30, 2007)

5. Village *mahalla* committee chairman

I think it's absolutely right that children are made to pick cotton. Through this they get used to hard work, and they help their parents. Some say it's better for them to study, but really what is the use? In our times the ability what is valued is the ability to talk, not to do anything. It's enough to praise the President a couple of times and nobody cares what kind of education you have. Me, for instance, I myself graduated from a technical high school, and work as an elder. I tell my kids and grandkids that nobody ever died from hard work. (October 10, 2007)

Syr Daria Province

Schoolchildren interviews

1. Male tenth grader

This is my fourth year going out to pick cotton. We've gotten used to using the money we earn picking for school clothes. That is the way we help our parents. Last year I got sick with hepatitis during when I was out picking. The doctor said I got it from dirty water. The tractor that was supposed to bring us water broke down and one day we had to drink water from the irrigation canal. Alongside the canal they had spread saltpeter, and so a lot of kids ended up getting poisoned. A few of them also got sick like I did. But not one of us got any kind of medical care, or medicines. The head of the *shirkat*, the district *khokim* and the local policeman go out in the fields and throw stones at the kids who are not picking because they're sick. If they catch hold of them, they might beat them up. Some of the kids are so afraid of them they run away from field to field.

2. Female gymnasium graduate

Question: Are you also a cotton-picker?

I am studying in a college-preparatory lyceum. Unlike the students in the colleges [specialized technical high schools], they don't chase us out to pick cotton. However, that doesn't mean that the cotton season leaves us unaffected. Last year when the plan wasn't fulfilled each one of us was charged with a task: we could either pick 20 kg. of cotton or pay money. The funny thing was that a few pupils took handed in cotton wool from splitting open their quilts at home.



3. Female ninth grader

Question: Who in your class picked the most cotton?

One of my classmates was the one who picked the most cotton in 2007 among the 9 classes. According to her own records she picked 4900

kilograms of cotton. The farm administration recorded that she picked a little over 4800 kilograms. For her active participation in volunteer work the district education department gave her a special certificate, free textbooks and school supplies. They also thanked her parents. (October 3, 2007)

4. Male ninth grader

Question: Do you consider it right that children are made to go out and pick cotton using school as a lever?

In general, the majority of the students are coerced into picking cotton. Therefore a majority of the students try to get out of it, and don't pick the cotton but steal it, so they can turn it in as if they picked it. The fact is over the last several years the productivity of the cotton fields has fallen drastically and so it's quite hard to fulfill the daily quotas set by the school administration. Many of my friends have just about given up hope of getting into any higher educational institution in the future, because as soon as our school year starts, the cotton is ripe and they chase us out to the fields. Even if we someday become university students, they'll make us go out and pick cotton there too. It's for this reason that none of the students care about studying. Their thinking goes like this, "I'll never amount to an educated person." (October 7, 2007).

5. Male eighth grader

Question: How do the teachers treat you out in the fields?

Of course our relationship with the teachers becomes a lot closer out in the fields than it is during the school year. They joke with us, to try to raise our spirits. We all talk about family issues and other problems. Some of the teachers play cards with us, or dance when we hold concerts. Sometimes they even drink alcohol with us. Therefore a lot of the students like the cotton harvest, especially those who don't like to study and are ignorant. What I mean to say is that everyone is equal out in the cotton fields—teachers and students.

6. Female eighth grader

Question: Are you satisfied with the quality of food you've been given during the 2007 harvest season?

My parents tell me about how they picked cotton back in Soviet times, and they got tasty things to eat. Moreover the authorities constantly checked to see if the students were getting enough meat and other foodstuffs. They even remember that there were organized leisure activities in the evening, with actors who gave plays, or films. Nowadays, sadly, not only are there no films, there's usually not electricity. Sometimes you can't even eat the food they give you—there's no meat, no potatoes, just noodles and stale black bread. Therefore a lot of the guys run home at night, because they can't tolerate this. Or sometimes parents or other relatives who live nearby bring their children food from home.

7. Female sixth grader

Question: How long has the cotton season lasted in 2007?

In our school, the last class day was September 11. The principal called a meeting and announced that since the cotton harvest season has begun, all classes for seventh graders and above are canceled. Fifth and sixth graders will be brought out to the fields every day after school. Those pupils can have lunch at home and then go to the school yard to be transported to the fields. The teachers expect the season to be shorter this year because

we've had good weather. Last year the children were out in the fields all the way to November 15. (October 15, 2007).

8. Male ninth grader

Question: Do students know that children are guaranteed protection from exploitation and forced labor?

(Surprised) Every year before the start of the cotton season our principal gathers the students and tells us that cotton is our national wealth, and it is our duty to bring in the harvest. Therefore a majority of the students understand their participation to be obligatory. Of course, there are those who try to get out of it. There aren't many of them. We had no idea about the rights that you mentioned, that we're not obligated to work. We have lessons about rights in our school, but to this day our instructor hasn't told us about our own rights. And our textbooks don't say that children's rights are guaranteed. (October 15, 2007)

9. Male eighth grader

Question: Have you met with any news correspondents from the local press? Have there been any publications or programs about the conditions during this year's cotton harvest season?

Last year a writer from the district paper came. He talked with us and asked us lots of questions about conditions. While we were talking we told him about the drinking water, and the problems. However the article never appeared, for unknown reasons. The teachers said that the correspondent couldn't get it though. He came back and left the teachers photographs of themselves as a souvenir. We often have visits from television crews, who film the cotton fields. The teachers say that our district bosses give money to the TV crews not to show our bad living conditions during the harvest. (October 20, 2007).



10. Male eighth grader

Question: By decree of the Cabinet of Ministers "On additional measures to organize the cotton harvest," each harvested kilogram is supposed to be paid 60 sum (about 5 US cents). According to our information, in the provinces this decree is not being carried out...

This year the cotton season began for us on September 10. The teachers told us then that the Finance department of the district *khokimiat* did not support the government's decision, and so we would only be paid 50 sum. However, after October 1 they paid us only 40 sum, and after mid-October, 35. Because this was already the second pass through the fields, there was no one else out picking but schoolchildren, and so they controlled us very strictly

to make sure we went. Our school opened up again only after the university students went home and the cotton harvest was over, and so classes began again. The government's decisions don't always get carried out, and nobody wrote any letters to any government agency. They know there's no use. (October 17, 2007).

11. Male ninth grader

Question: During the cotton harvest have you ever seen the district mayor or other leaders, education department officials, of the district or provincial level? Have they inquired about your living conditions?

The provincial governor, Abdurakhim Jalolov, came to visit the collective farm where we were picking cotton this year. However he did not meet with us students, and did not get acquainted with our living conditions. He held a meeting then went back. When the district or province bosses come out to the fields, they really never meet with schoolchildren. Most often, the people who come to see us are local police officers and prosecutors. They call on us to keep order, and to explain fire safety rules. (October 29, 2007).

12. Male eighth grader

Question: What kinds of vehicles do they use to transport you to the fields? Can you describe them?

The pupils from our class were brought out in wagons. They are hooked up to a tractor. The pupils climb up into the wagon and get situated, sitting down on their cotton gathering bags, and off they go, playing, or talking. Of course, together with the students, either in the wagon itself or in the cabin of the tractors, one of the teachers rides along. It's about 5-6 kilometers to the cotton fields, sometimes more. The wagons are old, and so sometimes there are holes in them. Though the holes may not be big, they are dangerous for children. Besides, the children are used to it. Sometimes when there is no tractor, we ride in trucks. At least a wagon or a truck is better than if we had to walk (October 30, 2007).

13. Male seventh grader

Question: how much money have you earned this season picking cotton?

I've already gathered and handed in 1,135 kilograms. I've received about 50 thousand sum (around 40 USD, author's note). For this I can buy some clothes, and give the rest to my parents. I have friends who have already earned 100 thousand sum. These are girls who pick a great deal of cotton. They are not even strong enough to lift these bundles up to the scales. The poor girls have their hands all scratched up. They wrap up their faces in scarves to protect from the cold and the wind. But the girls have more expenses. They are always running up to the mobile shops that come to us in the fields. We boys go out to pick only because we have to. Money is not so important, as no one demands any money from me (November 3, 2007).

14. Male ninth grader

Question: Does everyone go out to pick cotton, without exception?

Everyone is supposed to go out to pick cotton. But the son or daughter of the farm chairman, or the children of the teachers in most cases don't go out. If they do, after going with us to the fields they spend their time checking us and monitoring us. Often there are fights because of this. One time the *shirkat* chairman's son was checking up on us, and he told his father that one of the boys was not out picking. The next day, the chairman beat this boy very seriously. From that time that boy hasn't been out here. I hope nothing serious has happened to him (October 16, 2007).

15. Female ninth-grader

Last year was hard, because the cold weather came very early. If they bring electricity and gas to the places we live during the harvest season, then we'll come out to pick cotton in the future, too.

Question: But what about your studies?

What does it matter, if nobody is teaching in the school anyway? The teachers tell us we have to help our parents. Their children are also out here picking cotton, helping their families. When you go into town you look at the townspeople with envy. Every one of them has a cell phone. They're all dressed well, in the modern style. Look around—how are we dressed? If we pick cotton at least with the money we earn we can go into the district center and buy something. (September 30, 2007).

16. Female technical high school student

Every year we go out to pick cotton. Conditions are good. They pay us on time. But it's bad for us girls when they make us spend the night out in the barracks. There's no sanitation, no hygiene. There aren't even outhouses. The homeowners closest to the barracks allow us to use theirs. I'm ashamed to talk about this, but after all, it's a basic physiological need. As a result, several of the girls got sick. They are ashamed to tell their parents. They're afraid to go to the doctor. They wouldn't even know who to go to. If they make us pick the cotton, then they should at least provide humane conditions!

17. Male ninth grader

This is my second year on the cotton harvest. There's no school anyway. The teachers are gone; there are no textbooks. All the schoolchildren are used to this state of affairs. So when the cotton harvest starts, they think well at least we can help our parents. I'm going off to Kazakhstan anyway, when I finish school. You can earn good money there.

Question: Have you been to Kazakhstan?

I haven't, but I've heard grownups talking about it. In my school many kids have the same goal—to finish school and to get out of the country (September 16, 2007).

18. Female eighth grader

Question: How is this year's harvest season going? I've heard that you're far from your home, and living in barracks. How are the conditions there?

It's the same as last year, when we lived in the very same barracks. Last year the teachers promised to install a stove for heating the barracks. It's cold there. We're at our wits end over all the mice and rats. Nights we can't sleep because of all the rustling they make across the whole barracks, all the mice and rates. All of us living there are from one school. There are also school pupils living in the barracks in the neighboring farm, and there, conditions are even worse than ours. Whenever we are back in the shack we complain bitterly about the untenable conditions to our teachers and brigadiers, but no one listens. My girlfriends tell me "Just let it be. After all, the season will be over soon, and we'll get to leave. Don't say anything." That's why we haven't said anything to the chairman of the farm when he came. If we complain, it turns out they might not pay us. Every day I pick between 60 and 80 kilograms of cotton. All the cotton we gather now is registered as grade 1, but they tell us that it's grade 2. For grade 1 they are supposed to pay us 50 sum, but for grade 2 only 40. Soon we'll make the second pass through the fields, and then we'll have to pick up all the bolls that have fallen to the ground. Then for each kilogram they'll pay us only 25 sum. I plan to buy winter clothing with the money I earn this year. (September 25, 2007).

19. Female eighth grader

Question: What are living conditions like and how do they feed you where you are picking cotton this year?

The conditions aren't the worst—they're bearable. At any rate, they're not fatal. We are picking cotton as best we can. They don't pay us much, but at least they do pay us. Last year after the wheat harvest my parents were in debt to the farm, and I have to pay the farm to cover that debt from last year. They feed us regularly, usually boiled noodles, potatoes, cabbage, and rice soup. Often for dinner they give us a packet of "Rolton" or "Maggi" noodles. I really like the Maggi ones. We all eat them with pleasure. We even tell our parents that on Sundays they should bring us these Maggi noodles, or send them to us via someone. You put boiling water on them, and supper is prepared. There are no doctors here, so we have to treat ourselves. All the pupils have brought medicines like painkillers, iodine, antiseptics. Sometimes the teachers even ask us for them. (October 30, 2007).



20. Male eighth grader

Question: Isn't it hard to get down to studying after the cotton harvest ends?

Most of the time there are no studies after the harvest. So we come and go. Sometimes there's class and sometimes not. One teacher teaches several subjects, and even that one teacher often is absent, off in the district center. In the spring time

they bring us out to the fields to harvest the wheat, and in April-May we're also out working on cotton. Only a select few get to go study in Karshi or Tashkent, like the children of the farm chairmen or other officials. Children of these VIPs don't come out to pick cotton.

Question: When you grown up and have a family, will your allow your cotton to come out and pick cotton?

No. I'm going to move away from here. (September 30, 2007).

21. Male seventh grader

Question: How many children from your family are out picking cotton?

I and two of my older brothers are. As you see, the fields are close to our house. My parents pick their own cotton. The farm administration has forcibly assigned us...(thinks), I don't remember how many hectares of cotton. My older brothers are really tired. I'm told that the money I earn is paid out by the farm to my brothers, but my brothers complain that it's very little. It's our teacher who hands out the payment. Often they don't pay us, saying the money will go towards repairing the school building. (October 14, 2007).

22. Male seventh grader

Question: Why don't you demand that they pay you all the money you have earned?

Last week one of the ninth graders from class "A" did that. The brigadier beat him up badly. No one could come to his assistance. And his parents say nothing. So what are we supposed to do?

Question: This year, how many students from your school are out picking cotton?

I don't know exactly. I see almost everyone here. (October 14, 2007).

23. Male eighth grader

Question: What other opportunities to earn money do children have here, besides picking cotton?

Some of our kids go to Kazakhstan to gather scrap metal and sell it. Those kids go through an awful lot from their desire to earn a living. Sometimes people steal their bags, and even beat them up. I myself have witnessed how kids from our district have gone off to Kazakhstan to work. There's always cotton, and where there is cotton you can always earn some money. Otherwise, kids go to work in the markets, pushing wagons with goods. They go to Tashkent or to Kazakhstan. There are those who steal. And if they are caught, they go to jail. No, say what you will, I prefer to pick cotton.

Question: How much do you pick in a day? And, if you don't mind saying, do your parents force you to come out?

I'm in the fields from 7 am. Nobody forces me. I grab my sack and come out myself. In a day I can pick 60-70 kilograms. (October 14, 2007).

24. Male seventh grader

Question: What will you remember about the 2007 harvest season?

This is my first year coming out to pick cotton. Last year I couldn't come because I was sick. Our school has set a 25 kilo per day quota, and I meet it every day. I've helped my parents and contributed to the family budget. I'll remember this season because with the money I earned, I bought myself a soccer ball. Now I can play soccer as much as I like.

25. Female eighth grader

Question: Your friends mentioned you have been sick during the cotton campaign. If you don't mind, tell me about what happened.

It was a while ago that I started to have sharp pains in the lower right stomach. When they brought me out to the harvest it got worse. I began to feel nauseous, and to vomit. A clinic doctor came out to examine me, and said that I have hepatitis. That very day one of the teachers drove me home. I was admitted to the central district hospital. They asked me if any of my classmates were sick, and asked them too. No other cases of hepatitis were discovered. Now I feel ok. The doctors told me not to return to the fields this season.

Parent interviews

1. Mother

Question: You have seven children, five of whom are still in school. Do they go out to pick cotton?

This year I obtained a medical certificate for my son, freeing him from work picking cotton. They force them to go out to the fields and the pay doesn't even cover their expenses. Plus, I can't focus on work if I'm constantly worrying about my son, whether he's hungry. Plus he started to raise a fuss, demanding that I buy him new bedding.

Question: What about your younger children, for instance, in the 5th and 6th grades?

I purposefully did not allow my youngest daughter to go out. Their class director [name and school omitted] sent me an official letter stating that if I don't send my daughter to pick cotton then she can be expelled from school. The letter had the official round stamp of the school and the signature of the vice principal. I was so mad, I tore it up. The next day in the morning that teacher comes rushing to our house, demanding that I give him the letter. I told him that I tore it up. He asked me where I threw the pieces, and he went out to the garbage and picked out each one. I have no idea why he did this. (November 2, 2007).

2. Father

Question: Who is more responsible for the exploitation of children: the population, which doesn't know its own rights, or the government?

In my view, the people, the nation, is never to blame, because if the government is an authoritarian one, naturally it can bend the people to its will. There is no doubt that destitute and helpless people are fated to be slaves. In that sense, even the children of such people are exploited. Children are forced out to pick cotton in mass "khashars." I witnessed something like this recently. I was in Russia to earn some money. There, it turns out, there are underground centers where they take blood and harvest organs from children. And you know what—the children there were from Uzbeks and Tajiks. Parents from their sheer need, from poverty, agree to sell their own children. I consider it no less savage that underage children are forced out to pick cotton. (November 1, 2007).

3. Father

Question: Is it really so bad that children help out their families by earning a little money?

No, it's good that children help their families. However, this should not come at the expense of a chance for children to gain knowledge which is important for his future. On the contrary, nothing will be able to fill up the emptiness in that child's life, his future. I firmly believe that there will be a time that our nation will begin to value educated people again, and that our people will have good times once again. And then, we parents who are now getting such help from our own children will not be able to forgive ourselves that we deprived them of the chance to get an education. In sum, a nation that does not care for the fate of such an abandoned generation will have no future. (September 29, 2007).

4. Father

Question: How do you imagine your children's future? Do you think that they will be able to reach their full potential?

For a child to reach his full potential there must be an outside stimulus, and support for his ambitions. Each person must feel that his future is inextricably tied to the future of his parents, fatherland, nation. Besides this there must be effective education and constant guidance. But what do we observe at present? If from their earliest school days children are out in the cotton fields, and they see the examples of their older brothers and sisters, who can only be admitted to college by paying bribes...Can such a child reach his full potential, when he sees how his destitute parents struggle, and reads or hears only lies in the papers and on TV? In my view, there are certain conditions that have to be met before you can start forcing children out to mass "khashars," or exploiting their labor. Forcing children to work, or condemning them to slavery—this is one of the causes of our illness. Even the simplest, most uneducated person can see that the main cause of this illness is [state] policy. (October 10, 2007)

5. Father

Question: Have you ever expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that your children are sent out to pick cotton?

I drive a tractor. My two children, who are upperclassmen, are out picking cotton. I wouldn't even think about trying to get them out of the harvest, or obstruct their participation in the cotton campaign. After all, in my adult memory I've spent all my life in the cotton or wheat fields. My whole life has been spent in the fields. I don't know, maybe my children will get college degrees and become important people, so maybe my grandchildren won't go out to pick cotton, Now that's impossible, as cotton is a product of state policy. And how can you act against the state? Suppose you tried, they would put you in jail and accuse you of belonging to one of those Islamic tendencies like Hizb ut Takhrir or Wahabism. No, let's drop it. We need to live in peace.

6. Father, farmer

Question: Did either your children or your relatives' children have any accidents during this year's cotton harvest?

Thank god, they weren't involved in any accidents. However I have witnessed frequent accidents with children in the cotton fields. Many children, free from their parents' guidance during the harvest, like to swim in the irrigation canals. I've seen some drown, or get serious injuries due to poisonous insect bites. Some of the main accidents occur in the melon fields adjacent to the cotton. To protect their melons, the farmers spread toxic substances around the fields, and as a result, children are poisoned. (October 24, 2007).

7. Mother

Question: The cotton season has begun. Wouldn't it be better if, instead of picking cotton, your children were to be in school?

I have six children. My husband and eldest son left a year and a half ago for work in Russia. Two of my daughters are married off. Two of my sons study in the district center, in the seventh grade and in the ninth. This is the first year they've ordered my seventh grader out to the fields. He's a weak boy. Two years ago he got hepatitis. Next to our house we have a garden plot of around a tenth of a hectare. We grow vegetables there and somehow try to earn a living. This year the collective farm chairman insisted that I myself, my daughter-in-law and all my children go out to pick cotton, otherwise he would take the plot away from us. How can I go out and pick cotton? (Cries) My daughter in law is pregnant. The chairman said in that case I would have to pay one hundred thousand sum. When I told him that I could never pay that kind of money, he told me I would stop getting my welfare payments from the mahalla. I don't know where to turn to complain. I went to the school but I couldn't find the principal. Then I started to beg the teachers to leave my seventh-grade son home. I didn't let him go out to pick cotton. Now I don't know what will happen after the season ends with his studies in school. I pray that they don't expel him. (September 29, 2007)

8. Mother

Question: Do the children's earnings from cotton help the family budget?

Many parents are unhappy about their children being forced to pick cotton. Sometimes they have to obtain medical treatment for the children for months: they get sick with colds, injured from falls with broken limbs, they get diarrhea. Any money earned this way, let it be damned, comes at too high a cost. I'm a teacher. When the season begins I don't know where to turn. Half of the children miss their studies terribly, and half are happy to be out of school. They think that as long as there is no school they might as well earn a little money. These days it's hard to run a household. And what can one do—it is state policy, after all. I am forced to send my children out to pick cotton too, though it's a little easier on them. Since they are the children of a teacher, they are not obligated to fulfill the daily quotas. Still, at the end of the day, they're tired. Moreover, the weather is damp, and the mornings and evenings are cold. I bring my kids to the fields in the mornings and bring them home in the evenings. All the other children are brought in trucks from the district center at 7 o'clock in the morning. Sometimes they're driven in a tractor-pulled wagon. Seventeen kids this season got medical permission to stay home from the harvest (our school has 585 students). About 200 students went out to the harvest. From our school this year only the seventh, eighth and ninth graders were brought out. Last year they didn't make the seventh graders do it. (October 13, 2007).

9. Mother

Question: Do you think it right that children are made to harvest cotton?

My husband has been in prison for seven years. They tried him on charges of "Wahabism." I have nine children; four are married. Of the rest, two are disabled, and three are still in school. One of them is in the eighth grade. Myself I'm also out in the fields starting in the spring: plowing, sowing—in general, I'm always out in the fields. If I only could, I wouldn't leave the fields at all after the cotton season starts. As soon as the sun rises I'm out there. September 12 they brought out my son to harvest cotton to the neighboring district, and they are putting them up there. Now he will return home only at the end of November. Nevertheless, every Saturday he comes home and leaves me his pay of about 25-30 thousand sum a week. It's not bad, and it really does help. After the cotton is brought in we go out and gather the bushes, so we can use them in the clay oven to bake bread. If I had ten children, I would send them all out to pick cotton because where else can they go and work? At least the fields are nearby, and at least there is the possibility of earning a little money and helping their families and their parents. If they became thieves instead, they'd be sent to jail, so what can you do? (October 14, 2007).

10. Mother

Question: Are you happy with the level of knowledge of your children who are sent out to pick cotton?

No, quite the opposite. How can I be happy when they know nothing except cotton, digging in the earth and taking care of the livestock. I'm not against children picking cotton, but it is so hard for the smallest ones. Last year my daughter got very sick, and the doctors had a devil of a time trying to cure her. She had a kidney infection. Her hands and feet were all swollen. I didn't know where to turn. Usually the farm chairman and the brigadier go around to each house in the morning and chase people out to the cotton fields, but the day my daughter was so ill it was as if they had disappeared from the face of the earth. I couldn't find anyone. No one could help me. My oldest son lives in Tashkent. So I brought my daughter there, and she was treated in the Pediatrics Institute. This year they've brought her out again to pick cotton. She's in the ninth grade now. Though I've given her warm clothes and bedding, but the place where they are living is terrible. The teachers and *khokims* don't care at all about the children's wellbeing. For them the only thing is meeting the cotton plan. I don't need their money—I just want my daughter to stay healthy, so she can be married. Who would take a sick person? (September 30, 2007).

11. Father

Question: Are you aware that you can complain to the leadership of the district or the province? What would you think about appealing to the school to keep your child home from the cotton harvest?

Don't even ask about that, I'm not going to answer the question. I've lived in this village for thirty five years. All my life, and that of my wife, has been spent out in the fields. We have three children. They go to the *** school across the street. The oldest boy is in the eighth grade. September 5 their teacher told them that they are going out to pick cotton. My son and four or five other boys objected, and said they wouldn't go. The teacher let the other pupils go, but kept my son and the other boys in the classroom and beat them up, badly. My son came home in the evening in tears, with a swollen face and two black eyes. The next day I went to the school and met with the curriculum director. He refused to listen and called me an enemy of the people. I said to him "I've bent my back in these cotton fields my whole life and enough is enough. My son is going to live differently. I want him to study, to become educated, to occupy some responsible position." The curriculum director [name omitted] started to bang his fists on the desk and say that he would call the police, that I should stop lecturing him, and threw me out. He spoke to me in the informal, and really insulted me.⁸ So even though we didn't have any other food in the house, I packed what food we did have for my son's meal [out in the fields]. What else could I have done? After all, the only thing they give the cotton pickers for lunch is some potatoes, cabbage or macaroni. Last year five or six school kids, from my son's school, broke into houses trying to steal food. Their parents had quite a time trying to get them out of the police station. So, those were my thoughts as I left the school. (October 23, 2007).

⁸ Translator's note: similar to the French "vous" and "tu," Uzbek has formal and informal personal pronouns; in Uzbek, however, to speak to another adult who is not extremely close in the informal is considered extremely demeaning.

12. Mother

Question: Are you concerned about your children's future, when they are made to go out and pick cotton?

Of course we are concerned. I'm very troubled by the fact that our children are deprived of the chance to gain knowledge because in the spring they are out preparing the fields and sowing, and in the fall, due to the cotton harvest, and in the winter because the school isn't heated and they can't hold classes. People say that you can pay a bribe and get your child into an institution of higher learning. But instead we've hired tutors so that they can work with our children. It won't always be like this, probably. Probably there will be a day when a new government will replace this one... (September 30, 2007).

Teacher interviews

1. Female preschool teacher

Each year they make our preschool teachers go out and pick cotton for 10 or 15 days. As if they need the four or five of us to bring in the harvest! A few of the teachers who have refused to go out have been fired. This year seven people, farmers, have been found guilty of misdemeanor offenses. These people, instead of going out to pick cotton, were working on their own farms, and they didn't send their children out to pick cotton either. They didn't obey the orders of the khokim. One person [name omitted] has even been charged with a criminal offense. It seems that he insulted the head of the *shirkat* when that person came to his house in the middle of the night to demand that he go out and pick cotton. In our little town it's the prosecutor's office that is responsible for overseeing everything having to do with cotton. If the *khokim* points to someone, then the prosecutor or the police will go and get him, and if he says to put them in jail, they will.

2. Teacher in medical vocational high school

Our province has an extreme continental climate, and is located in the steppe zone. Therefore our people require particularly close medical attention, and there shouldn't even be any thought of bringing children out to pick cotton. Sadly, in this era of technological advances, pupils are still made to pick cotton. It is very hard for them. Half the students out in the cotton fields are chronically ill. It's good for them in one sense that they are children, as they face all these difficulties with playfulness. Adults wouldn't be so resilient. The barracks where the children are housed are sometimes old school buildings or stores, or haylofts that could collapse at any moment. There are no sanitary facilities and so all the rules of hygiene are broken. Rats and mice are running all over. And the children find it all interesting; they don't pay attention to it much. After you witness this you are overwhelmed with frustration that it's not possible to do anything about it.

3. University lecturer

Question: Does the fact that the students are made to pick cotton affect their learning?

As a rule, young people between the ages of 16-25 have the highest abilities to absorb knowledge. Precisely at this age they should not be distracted from their studies. The cotton harvest has a very serious negative effect. During exam time the questions from the official bodies cover the whole program of study. But the students have no idea about most of this—how can they, if these classes never took place, so how would they have any knowledge about this part of the course? A few of the professors have a regular schedule of bribes for certain grades in their discipline: a “4” for four thousand sum, a “5” for five thousand, etc. To get grades in all subjects the average bribe fluctuates from 50 to 100 US dollars. All of this, and this attitude toward students is extortion, pure and simple. None of these kids, with the knowledge that they have, can be admitted to an institution of higher learning on their own merits. Despite this, all the universities are full. These are yesterday’s school pupils filling up the universities, and they remain as ignorant as they were before. I don’t know what kind of professionals they can become in the future. The influence of cotton on higher learning is deep and destructive.

Question: So tell us, professor, is there any way out of this situation?
Cotton should be removed from state control. There is more harm that comes from cotton than good. Cotton growing should become purely voluntary, not obligatory. Cotton should be grown by those farms and *shirkats* that can make it profitable. However, who would ever agree to this? (September 16, 2007).

4. Male university lecturer

Question: How do you feel about the use of students in the cotton harvest, coming from a scholarly point of view?

One of the government’s priorities is for the institutions of higher learning to prepare qualified specialists. It is generally accepted that in order to develop as a country, we need such people. Despite the fact that this question gets a lot of attention, I don’t think the goals will be realized.

Question: What is the reason for this?

The qualifications of the teachers who are themselves responsible for preparing these specialists is not up to par. This is the case due to entirely objective reasons. For instance, each year they spend 5 months out of nine in the cotton fields. We all know about this bitter fact, but yet we close our eyes.

Question: Because you are afraid?

Of course. Who wants to be punished? It’s very simple to dismiss someone from their post. They won’t care about your experience, your authority, your length of service. It is for this reason that we all hold back from making statements at important meetings. It is extremely depressing to think that this comes at the cost of our future. (September 25, 2007).

5. Male sociology teacher

Question: Do you think it is useful that children are made to go out and pick cotton?

I see many positive sides to children's participation in the cotton harvest. This forms the habit of socially useful labor? Why is it normal in America and in Europe for children to go out and earn money, why is this a common occurrence? It's only these last few years that they try to hide it. In the USSR people got used to getting money without working, to being freeloaders. Those families where everyone is working, they live well.

Question: What about working conditions, certainly whether or not there are adequate conditions should be taken into account?

Well, these are the conditions that we are capable of providing. What can one do? Our leaders are all doing what they can. It is difficult for them, too. They have lots of expenses. People who have never held managerial positions think it's easy, but they don't know what a balance sheet is. It seems like everything is OK, if only the people wouldn't be so demanding. Take for example Russia, a country where, if the slightest thing goes wrong, they start to write about it in the press and show it on television. However here you can't show those kinds of things. If somebody needs better conditions, then they ought to go out and create them themselves.

6. Female primary school teacher

Question: As someone who is responsible for the lives of your students, have you taken an interest in how they are fed during the cotton harvest?

Of course when they get home in the evening we ask them all about it. I can attest to the fact that this year it was particularly bad. For the midday meal they got some sort of mush, a sort of soup with no meat or with stale noodles. A few parents started to complain about this, but their cries and pleas went unanswered. They went to the local mayor's office, to the district and provincial education departments. None of this had any effect. They were told that the finance department did not allot funds, and supposedly, because the farms did not fulfill their cotton quotas, they had no funds in their accounts. Therefore the conditions for our children are so horrendous. I think that if it will be like this next year, we will try to keep our children away from the harvest, even if they will be expelled.

7. District vocational high school inspector

Of course we can't hide the fact that primary school students are brought out to pick cotton. The administration of our Center has done its work in creating good conditions for our students, in getting them out to the fields and monitoring their work. Keep in mind that whether or not they go out is not a question that is decided by the Center. This is an order we receive from the *khokimiat* and we carry it out.

8. Private girls' tutoring center worker

Question: How can girls grow up to be worthy brides if they are systematically sent out to pick cotton?

Many people know that during the cotton season, adolescent girls are far from their parents' and society's control, which can lead in the future to many negative consequences. This is particularly true in regard to the physiological changes taking place in the girls in the older classes, which can lead to various kinds of illness. They are too ashamed to talk about this and so the illnesses get worse. There should be mobile medical units to monitor them during the cotton harvest if they are to become full-fledged, health mothers. Moreover, there is another important problem of the negative moral influences on the adolescents.

Question: Do you yourself go out to pick cotton?

No, my father doesn't allow me.

Question: And why is that?

My father is the chairman of a *shirkat*. (November 5, 2007).

9. Male schoolteacher

Question: What is it like in school during the cotton campaign?

I'm sick and tired of hearing that 'teachers don't teach anymore.' The pupils themselves don't study anymore. During the cotton harvest alone the children aren't in the classroom for three months. It takes another month for them to get used to the rhythms of school. Finally, right before the end of the school year the children are again brought out for fieldwork.

Question: What do people have to say about this?

People have gotten used to it, and say things like "who is going to do the fieldwork if not children?" It is due to cotton that the whole school curriculum is destroyed. You don't know what to start with and where to end. There are other problems, too—there are few textbooks or teaching specialists, so the same teacher runs four different classes. I feel sorry for the children. They are growing up ignorant. I lived through the Soviet period, but I never witnessed a situation in which our own government is promoting illiteracy and ignorance (Syr Daria province, September 30 2007).

10. Male schoolteacher

Question: Have you learned how much cotton your pupils pick during the season, and how much they can earn for this?

This season two of my sons took part in the harvest. The quota for ninth graders is 50 kilograms, and for seventh graders, 30 kilograms. They both met the targets or even

exceeded them by 5-10%. The school was closed for one and a half months. Over that period both my sons gathered more than four tons of cotton. They earned over 200 thousand sum (approximately 150 USD, author's note). Those funds were not absorbed by the family budget; my sons spent them on their own needs—textbooks, some clothes. But my youngest son got sick after the season.

11. Male schoolteacher

Question: Have you ever compared our children with children of other nationalities? Do you see any great differences between them?

I am a teacher, and so I have had the chance to compare our children with those from other nations. I think that psychologically our children are no different. But the drastic differences in their living conditions are immediately apparent. Setting aside our neighboring countries, I don't think there's another nation that treats its children like such obedient slaves. We use child labor in every possible sector: cotton pickers, market sellers...Such things are much less frequent for children of other countries. That's why you can't believe any of our government's words about children's rights (October 26, 2007).

12. Male schoolteacher

Question: Do they take into consideration the views of teachers before sending the children out to the cotton fields?

In Soviet times, during the cotton season they took into account the opinion of all specialists: agronomists, teachers, even farm workers. Before the harvest started they gathered these people together to discuss things. Before bringing the children out to the fields they considered how useful it would be or how harmful for the health of the children. However, these days during the season the *khokimiat* ignores any agricultural specialists. The cotton is grown and ready to be picked. They force the population, schoolchildren, students. No one else is needed. In fact, there should be specialists out there, carrying out technical work, monitoring the harvest. But it's all backwards. It's the procuracy and police who monitor the harvest, and they have no idea about how cotton is grown—on bushes or trees. Say what you want at meetings, nobody pays the least attention to you. To the contrary. It's all pointless to even bother. With this kind of "unique" policy, with such leaders who don't know which way is up, I doubt our future is going to be great. In the words of Islam Karimov, our children have got to be happier and more knowledgeable—that is, if they can escape slavery in the cotton fields (November 1, 2007).

Farm worker interviews

1. Female farm director

Question: Do you receive any complaints during the cotton harvest?

Currently it's only the schoolchildren who inspire confidence as cotton pickers, and are useful, compared to all the others. Of course, there are negative sides of their participation, but it's the best solution for us. The reason is this: adults wouldn't come out if we didn't provide them with a good lunch, and we simply don't have the means to do this. Our expenses are too great. We have no such problems with schoolchildren. Moreover, the hundreds of town dwellers who used to come out to help are no longer around. Now, everybody gets by as best he can. In such conditions the selfless assistance of schoolchildren is the best thing for us. There are no complaints, no scandals. You don't have to feed them, and they don't complain about the low pay.

2. Female farm director

Question: How do you view forced child labor?

Children must be taught to work from an early age. If they don't pick cotton, then they won't be able to earn money. What's so bad about them bringing home 15-20 bunches of cotton bushes before the plowing is done? Some people say it's not right to bring them out to the fields, but I don't agree. I myself learned to work hard from childhood. And I don't want for anything. In our President's words "We're just as good as other people now, and will continue to be so in the future."

3. Male *shirkat* director

Thank goodness for the schoolchildren, those in the lycees and colleges. Each year they pick the cotton without any loss. As much as we are able we try to create good conditions for them. We serve them hot food twice a day. I am opposed to bringing them out in tractor wagons. There should be busses for them. Last year two kids fell out of a wagon, and one of them died. It was sad and disturbing that the district government did not provide any kind of assistance to those families whatsoever; they didn't even take part in the funerals. Let the children pick cotton, but there have to be the right conditions for them. Because if there aren't, then it's really hard for the kids. This year four of them fell victim to a car that was driving along at great speed. This case was covered up, but even after it happened nothing changed.

4. Female farmer

Every year they tell us "You take such and such a high school, and you take such and such." To house the children and students is a huge headache. Some of their parents start to create problems, others come to the harvest sick. Let them give us our tranches on time, and we ourselves will get people to pick the cotton. We don't need schoolchildren and students to do this work.

5. Male farmer

Question: It seems that you've come out with your whole family to pick cotton.

Each year my self with my wife and children pick cotton in the steppe. But we're not out here until the end of the season, because we're picking only to earn enough money to get

our wheat for the year, and to get that wheat which we have bought. If you look at it from that perspective, it's not bad that children are taking part. What is left for us to do, if there's no other way to earn a decent living?

Question: But many people are dissatisfied that children are made to pick cotton.

What does it matter what people say? What can you do, if picking cotton is a way to survive? What else can a person do—steal, kill others, leave the country to work as hired labor in a foreign land? Our district is practically empty—all the young men have left in search of work. What is there left to do? We have no other options. Whoever wants to should be allowed to be against cotton, but we don't see any use from such discussions. Whoever goes out to pick, an adult or a child, they still get paid (September 30, 2007).

6. Male farmer

Question: There are an increasing number of crimes committed by young people left without parental supervision. How do you think this problem is tied to the exploitation of child labor in the cotton campaign?

I'm a former police officer, now getting a pension after many years of service in the internal affairs ministry. Now I'm a farmer, and in my farm I have children from the upper grades working, those who are already practically of age. They come out to work with their parents. As a specialist I can say that their participation in mass "khashars" in some sense helps them to become grownups. Left without parental supervision, students will start to smoke or commit petty offenses. This is very negative, as it is a bridge to more serious crimes. The use of child labor in the cotton harvest, in mass khashars does create conditions for the growth of youth crime. I'm against forced child labor, and I tell my workers all the time that they should leave their children home. But often they are working on their own plots, so they send their children out to the cotton fields. When it's the parents themselves who are creating the conditions, you can't really do anything—how can you ask a child to fulfill a daily plan? (September 21, 2007).

7. Female farm worker

Question: Do you know of any instances of children leaving for Kazakhstan to pick cotton there?

Teachers in Kazakhstan schools don't take very young children for work. I have witnessed how they allow female school graduates to work in the fields, those with sturdy builds. Naturally every parent wishes for their children to go pick cotton in Kazakhstan's Maktaral district, which is just a few kilometers from us, because they pay so well there. That's why they can pick and choose whom they will to be cotton pickers. It's not every student who wants to go pick cotton in Kazakhstan that is so lucky. However, I have met children who have gone to the harvest in Kazakhstan with their parents and relatives (October 19, 2007).

8. Male farm worker

Question: They say that you are really good at picking cotton, but that you do it in another district. Why is that?

I go to Syrdaria district to pick cotton, where you can live in the farmers' house.

Question: Is there not enough cotton in your district?

It's true, I could pick cotton here. But in that district they pay you 20-25 sum more per kilogram. I heard that in that district their own cotton pickers go off to Kazakhstan where they pay still more. In our district they sent out three schools to pick the cotton. How can anyone pick cotton among all those children? (October 10, 2007)

9. Male tractor station engineer

During the cotton campaign they call on us to create conditions for the pupils, and to send out machines to bring them to the fields. Even though our tractor park is an independent, self-sustaining enterprise, since cotton is our common concern, we go out to the fields. But I'm against sending little children, still yet so immature, out to pick cotton. I too have children, but I don't let them go out to the harvest. I feel that it is enough that I go, and that my children should be at home. Last year my son went out to pick cotton and got hepatitis. He hasn't been himself since. I'm afraid to give him any hard work, as he nearly died. (September 30, 2007)

10. Male farm director

Question: Has anyone made you provide the children participating in the "khashar" with food and drinking water? Can you guarantee the quality of the water and other things that you give them?

Each year when the schoolchildren come to pick cotton in my fields, I myself supply them with drinking water. Using special barrels for that purpose from the garage of the farming association, I bring drinking water from the taps near the district center. In a few cases when there was no water in the pipes, I bring water from the irrigation canal that flows through the district. It's hard to say anything about the quality of that water. After all, I grew up on that water myself. And I'm healthy. However, the doctors from the Central Hospital are always saying that you at least need to chlorinate this water. But not everyone follows this recommendation, because we are sure that this water wouldn't poison anyone. A few doctors have said that from pollution or because the water itself is of low quality one can get kidney stones, or enlarged spleen or liver. There very well might be a dose of truth in this. As a farmer, it's my responsibility to fulfill the production quota and productivity of the harvest. Let their parents worry about the health of children (September 30, 2007).

11. Female farm director

Question: How efficient is it to bring children out to pick cotton?

I am categorically against making children pick cotton. Therefore we have no agreements with any school directors. However, the *khokimiats* of the district and the province give us orders to use child labor, and the farmers have to carry out those orders. As a farm director myself, I would much prefer to hire adult laborers. When you use children, besides your administrative responsibility for them you also have a moral responsibility. For instance, if someone falls asleep in the fields, or if someone has an accident, how are we going to look their parents, our village neighbors, in the eyes? I had just such a case. Therefore, I don't care how effective or how harmful it is for the farmer, I'm categorically against this practice. I don't understand our government: the whole world is more and more relying on technological means, on automation. And here we are using the most ancient method—condemning children to obligatory slavery (September 25, 2007).

Agricultural specialist interviews

1. Former state cotton conglomerate chairman

Question: Has the shift from state-owned business to private property led to any qualitative changes?

By 2001 there were 161 cotton processing enterprises that had been privatized. 122 gins were converted into publicly traded companies. In the process of privatization the capital assets were reviewed and 149 of the companies were left with their previous ownership structure. The remaining 28 enterprises were converted to limited private stock ownership. Total assets were equal to 13 billion sum. Since independence there have been 13 new processing plants opened. In order to introduce new technology, in place of outdated equipment, we've bought the ZKhDD brand of cotton fiber separator, and have introduced 158 separate DP-130 machines. The old 3KV condensers have been replaced with 88 high-productivity fiber separators: 5KV, 7KV. Instead of the old linters, 5LP, which separate the seed from the fiber, we have 176 separate compact 5LP=Ms. In the cleaning ships instead of the 103 UKhK machines we have 66 of the compact ChKh-6M machines. The drying ships are now equipped with new gas generators TZh1.5. And the reason for this is that the volume of exports is growing, as interest in Uzbekistan's cotton fiber is rising.

2. Male administrator for regional cotton conglomerate

Question: What are the indicators for cotton productivity, and profitability, in the Syr daria province, and how does it compare with other provinces?

Our region's farmers plant cotton in lands that are damp and saline. Because they mastered new technical measures, in 2005 for the first time in many years they were able to fulfill their annual plan for delivering raw cotton. We sold to the state 248 thousand tons, which is a significant achievement. Unfortunately after that point despite the acquisition of some new machinery, we have not been able to repeat the experience of two years ago.

3. Farm agronomist

Question: As a specialist, can you say anything about the effects on children of mineral fertilizers, and the chemicals used in the cotton fields in order to grow cotton?

Cotton only grows here thanks to treatment with mineral fertilizers and various chemicals. The irrigation drainage brings the remnants of these toxic substances into the groundwater. Cotton pickers are vulnerable to poisoning by these substances. Of course the toxins affect young children's growing bodies, when they are involved in plowing, harvesting cotton, or gathering the bushes from the fields. Especially in the Syr Daria steppe, which began to be intensively cultivated in Soviet times, the climatic and geographic conditions take a huge toll on people. At present, an enormous number of Syr Daria's children suffer from infectious diseases, as their immunity level is extremely low. This is the influence of cotton. In my view, the sooner we halt this contemporary slavery, the better it will be for everyone (September 29, 2007).

Healthcare worker interviews

1. Central district polyclinic doctor

Cotton is the cross the Uzbek people must bear their whole lives. As a doctor I was sent to Saikhunabad, Mirzachul and Syr Daria districts to examine children working on the cotton harvest. The children's condition is enough to drive one to tears. The start of the cotton campaign brings disease: whether common colds, or intestinal disorders, hepatitis, accidents, snakebite. Not one of the sick children receives the necessary medical attentions or medicines. If the poor child needs an operation, then he must be taken to the capital, to Tashkent. In the districts there are neither medicines nor medical equipment. I've had to appeal to all kinds of government agencies...

2. Private clinic doctor

Question: What kind of complaints do you hear during the cotton campaign?

I've been a doctor for sixteen years. The main cause of illness in rural children is the lack of vitamins and the low caloric value of their food. However during the cotton harvest season, colds and intestinal disorders become much more common in children. Our hospital gives them prescriptions, but they are too poor to fill them. It's rare that someone leaves our hospital actually cured.

Question: Is it not possible to appeal to higher levels of authority about this?

I've appealed to the Ministry of Health itself, but it's all in vain. We've got to create decent conditions at the very least for little children. It appears that there is no possibility to avoid sending them out to the cotton fields, but conditions there are horrendous, especially for girls. At the very least, girls should be freed from the obligation to pick cotton.

3. District epidemiological service doctor

Question: Doctors are not obligated to pick cotton, are they?

Are you kidding me? For us the cotton harvest season is the hardest time of the year. We have to leave all our work to go out and pick cotton. If we don't, they won't pay us, and won't give us any peace.

4. Provincial *khokimiat* health department doctor

Question: Have you observed any mass food poisonings of children during the cotton harvest?

The education department sent out to pick cotton students from approximately 296 schools. According to the monitoring that our department carried out, there were no cases of mass food poisonings or infectious diseases that arose from inadequate nutrition. However there were infectious disease cases that were due to the children not following the rules of hygiene. Thanks to our department's organization of medical posts, we could oversee the rations and the freshness of the food products used. This is the reason why there were only isolated cases of food poisonings in the Syr Daria province this cotton season. However, due to the carelessness of some school and farm administrations, there were cases of acute infectious diseases, like diarrhea and viral hepatitis. (October 30, 2007).

5. Provincial epidemiological service worker

Question: Were there any outbreaks of illness among the pupils harvesting cotton this year?

In our district there continue to be cases of forced child labor. The sanitary-epidemiological conditions are, to a certain degree, dangerous. This year during the harvest season we registered cases of flu, chronic hepatitis and intestinal typhoid. Despite vaccinations and other preventive medical measures we registered 14 cases of hepatitis C, 10 typhoid cases and around 50 cases of flu. Due to the fact that there is a very low level of medical culture among the population, and that most children's diseases are treated at home, we did not register many cases of colds or acute respiratory illness. That is why the cases registered at local state hospitals do not represent the real picture in the area. There were no quarantines established in this district to contain infectious diseases. One can say that there were no truly dangerous epidemiological situations. (November 1, 2007)

Interviews with the local population

1. Mahalla committee chairman

Question: Do you feel under stress?

I'm going out of my mind. I tell people: time to go out to pick cotton. No, they don't go. They don't get it. I'm not telling them to go out and work in my personal garden! Not long ago I got into an argument with one young woman who has a two month old baby. She

came to the mahalla to get the baby's welfare payment.⁹ I explained that there is no cash, but she doesn't get it and continues to get on my nerves. So I said that she should leave her baby with her mother in law and go out and pick cotton. Her father in law comes to my house that evening. I got so mad, I threw the application for the welfare payment back at him. Now they won't get any payments for that child for a year. She'll only get them next year if she goes out to pick cotton. Anyway, you can usually only get cash during the harvest season.

Question: How much is the payment?

Ten thousand sum

Question: So, in the mahalla in order to get social welfare payments for children, you have to take part in the cotton harvest?

There's no other way to get people to go out and pick cotton. They don't listen to any other authority. It seems like there's no other way. (November 5, 2007)

2. Mahalla committee elder

Question: What is the attitude of the people in your mahalla toward cotton?

In the USSR we had to pick cotton right up to December. In those days, university students and upperclassmen took part in the harvest, but today I see that it's even the pupils from the younger grades out picking. This is unfair toward them. What sort of human values allow cotton to be picked by little children? The *shirkat* chairman, the *khokim* of the district and even provincial officials who come to our mahalla hold meetings, and openly demand that people go out and pick cotton. They have made it obligatory to bring out little children to pick cotton. But this is [only through the use of] violence! Nobody could say anything against it. Even I, an elder of the mahalla, cannot demand that people send their children out to the fields. I have no moral right to do this.

3. Female shopkeeper

Question: What do you think about the fact that children are made to go out and pick cotton?

Nowadays, sales are good during the cotton season because people have money. Sure, children are sent out to pick cotton. Now we sell things on credit before the cotton campaign, and after they take part in the harvest, people pay their debts. The children live up the trade with their small purchases of gum, sunflower seeds and other things. It's good for me if the children are out picking cotton. All the rest is of no interest to me. For me the important thing is, when I'm going home do I have money in my pocket or not?

⁹ It is state policy that the income support payments for poor families with children are given out by the local citizens' councils (mahalla committees).

Question: And does your own child go out to the cotton fields?

Yes of course. He sells cigarettes, gum and sunflower seeds to the other pickers. His sales are higher than mine. I'm stuck in one place but he's moving around all the time, with his cotton apron across his shoulder and with bags of goods for sale in his hands.

4. Male handicrafts center employee

There is a lot of money spent these days on building colleges [specialized high schools]. However I don't think the level of education there is very high. The cotton season interrupts the academic year, and so students have to master four months of material, planned for the time when the cotton campaign is going on, in one month. The teachers are forced to do this, to get their salaries. But for the students it's inadequate. Instead of ten shiny, richly appointed colleges, they should build eight, and use the money they save to buy 40 cotton harvesting combines. Today's educational policy is carried out just for show.

5. Handicrafts collective member

The cotton season lowers and impoverishes people's thinking. This is particularly unfortunate for young people, whose base of knowledge in life is just being formed. Until the cotton season is over, all the participants are isolated from books, television, newspapers and in general from any source of information.

6. Former provincial newspaper editor

Question: The newspapers have more work to do during the cotton campaign, don't they?

This depends on the commands we get from on high. Usually it leads to negative consequences if our correspondents have too much time on our hands. However it's bad when they make busy people [go to pick cotton], and idlers are left by the wayside.

Question: What do you think about the use of children and students to pick cotton?

It was students that I had in mind. We need to work out effective means to attract unemployed youth to the cotton harvest.

7. Former state farm chairman

Question: How great a role does machinery play in the planting, growing and harvesting of cotton?

Currently less than one tenth of the Soviet period machinery remains. Almost all cotton is picked by hand. And a lot of the current machines are not in working order. The machines imported from America have been "sold."¹⁰ To resolve the overall problem will take a

¹⁰ The subject refers to the government's purchase of cotton harvesters from the U.S. firm Case. *Shirkats* were forced to assume the cost of acquiring this very expensive machinery, which is part of the reason most of them

serious analysis of the mechanization problem. After all, farmers themselves also try to avoid any expenses acquiring machine harvesters.

Question: Do you see any differences between the current period and that in which you were a farm chairman?

This is the reason that I left my position. We had storehouses full of broken down machinery, and the fields and livestock yards were full of it too. It would have been useful for us to hand them in as scrap metal. Maybe instead of 10 unneeded combines we could have bought one new one. However no one was concerned with this problem. How many "Case" harvesters we were promised! But not one materialized. We could have worked with many different foreign firms, but we were not allowed. We have enough labor, enough raw materials, the soil is good, but agricultural technology is on the most primitive level. This is the real reason I was moved out of the position of chairman.

8. District bank accountant

Question: It seems like the bank doesn't have any problems during the cotton harvest season, as there aren't a lot of workers in the bank?

There are arguments over payments between farmers for the harvest. Somebody pays more, somebody less. Those who try to pay higher to speed up their harvest later will have problems. We will give out as much money as we are told to by the higher authorities. We don't have any problems with the supply of cash.

have huge debts both to the state and to private banks, though they themselves were not consulted as to whether to acquire the harvesters or not.