Reduction in the use of Child labor

There were several factors that made this year’s cotton harvest different than previous ones. In July, Uzbekistan’s Prime Minister issued verbal orders that schoolchildren were not to be sent to pick cotton, a statement that merely reiterated the existing national law that prohibits child labor. In previous years, there were similar orders, but they have never been fulfilled in practice. This time, it has had an effect: for the first time in many years, children under the age of 16 were not sent via a large-scale mobilization effort to the cotton harvest. During the summer – most schools across the country remained open.

Nevertheless, in some parts of Uzbekistan’s provinces, schoolchildren were sent to pick cotton for a few days, usually after school, but in some places, during school hours.

It is difficult to judge the scale of the use of child labor throughout the country. According to reliable information from our monitors, in one area of Kashkadaryo region, they had observed at least three schools from which the students were sent out to the fields. In one district of Andijan region, at least two schools were shuttered for one month from the end of September to send children from the fifth grade and up with their teachers to the fields. In Tashkent and Samarkand regions, schoolchildren were sent to the fields for a couple days, but then brought back to school. It seems that such instances were at the initiative of the local authorities. And that once the information on the exploitation of the children was discovered by journalists and human rights activists, the state reacted.
In several regions, the parents themselves took their children to pick cotton. In rural areas, where the unemployment rate is high, and where there is no cash, the autumn cotton harvest is the only time of the year when there is an opportunity to earn cash, in particular at the first cotton harvest, when the rates for the cotton are highest. Local residents would pick cotton as a family, together with children. This year, it was possible to sell cotton at rates twice as high as those set by the state, to those coming from the cities to collect cotton.

As for the learning at school, teachers were, as always, exploited as free labor. This year, they were brought in en masse to pick cotton. An estimated 60% of all schoolteachers were forced to work in the cotton fields. Although schools remained open, classes got larger and lessons were made shorter or even cancelled as a result of the shortage of teachers to teach them. As for lyceums, colleges (high schools), and universities, they all, almost without exception, were closed.

**Increased mobilization of adults**

In general, the system of forced mobilization of adults to pick cotton remained the same, and implementation of the system was carried out with a demographic shift to older children and more adults. The government made up for not using labor of schoolchildren by mobilizing adults as well as university and high school students – and in much higher numbers than in previous years.

The mass mobilization of adults to the cotton fields began as early as September 3. Each organization was obliged to delegate a certain number of staff members to be sent to pick cotton, roughly 16% of its staff, on rotation base, for 2-3 weeks at a time. Upon one team’s return from the field, a second team would be sent out to replace them. The authorities set quotas for how much cotton state and private organizations from around the country were required to deliver.

An individual who wanted an exemption from picking cotton, could do so by paying roughly USD 200. In Uzbekistan, this amount would correspond to more than an average monthly salary. The money was supposedly used to hire *mardikors* (day laborers) to work in their place; however, no one knows really where this money really goes, as there are no transparent systems in place to account for it. The scale of extortions from the state employees, private businesses and students has been unprecedently large this year.

Adults from the cities who were sent to pick cotton were required to deliver from 60 to 80kg of cotton, depending on the quotas set. The work routine for them was harsh – waking up at 4:30 – 5:00 in the morning, and working late into the evening. If a cotton picker could not deliver the amount of cotton that was expected of him/her, he/she would need to buy the remainder from local residents. And if he/she could not purchase it, then the amount would be deducted from his/her salary. If a business was large and
had a large staff, then the missing kilograms were collected in the form of money from those staff members who for some reason or another did not go out into the fields – due to illness or because they had young children. If the business was small, then the burden of paying for the missing kilograms became the responsibility of the cotton pickers themselves.

Medical personnel were forced to pick cotton around the country and in large numbers, thereby straining the delivery of essential medical care. From Tashkent hospitals and clinics only 11,000 nurses and doctors were sent to work in the fields as far as to Arnasay district of Jizzak region, instead of attending to the treatment and care of their patients. From an interview with an employee of a Tashkent clinic, we discovered that nearly 15% of the clinic staff was out in the fields picking cotton. There was even a case in which a patient came to the clinic seriously ill only to find out that her doctor was in the fields picking cotton. She had to phone the doctor in the field and receive a doctor’s consultation via telephone. A doctor from Bukhara, also interviewed, indicated that the same mobilization of medical personnel occurred in her region and, from her understanding, throughout the country. Individual citizens interviewed recounted being turned away from medical facilities because the doctors and nurses were at work in the cotton fields.

A remarkable fact: this year’s cotton crop was harvested much more rapidly than in the past, and probably at a lower financial cost to the state. The material costs associated with manual cotton collection had been passed on to the citizens. The adults who were sent to pick cotton did not receive any payment for the cotton that they picked, which is unlike the case with schoolchildren. The pressure on adults to go to the fields to pick cotton was so intense that some even expressed regret that children were no longer sent to pick cotton.

### Increase in the exploitation of high school and university students

According to our observations, the scale of mobilization of high school and university students has also increased. High school students who are usually between 16 and 18 years of age, were partially paid for the first and second collection of cotton. As usual, bonded pickers, both young and old, should pay for their own meals. Everyone had been told that in order to cover the costs for food for one day, they needed to pick 35kg of cotton. That is, in fact, if a student picked the set amount – averaging about 60kg, then she/he should receive a cash payment for the remaining 25kg. In practice, this means that for a day of hard work for a paltry meal, a half-starved 16-year old could earn about 20 cents.

The students we interviewed told us that they lived under appalling living conditions. They were not provided with sufficient drinking water. They were housed in the sport halls of the local schools, in village cinemas, and in the meeting halls of administrative buildings. They slept on the floors, worked 10-11 hour days, and, some students...
reported, they were beaten by their teachers if they did not deliver their daily quotas of cotton.

As of the beginning of November and since the very beginning of September, most of the students had not yet even spent a single day studying in the new academic year. On the first day of the academic term, nearly all of the colleges and lyceums in the provinces had their students prepare to depart for the cotton fields. The students were informed that if they did not want to go to the cotton fields, then they should pay USD 200 or else they would face dismissal from school.

As always, the authorities carefully made sure that there was no documentation of the use of state employees and students. Students were forbidden from using their mobile phones to photograph the places where they were living out in the cotton fields. Our monitors observed individuals watching over the cotton fields where children worked. Police posts were set up in the parts of the districts where people lived.

Every year, we receive reports of deaths in the cotton fields. But this year, we had the highest number of reported deaths than previous years; we know of seven deaths – five of which were of college students. UGF is preparing materials for publication on these death cases.

No independent monitoring

Once again, the government of Uzbekistan failed to invite the International Labour Organisation to conduct monitoring during the 2012 cotton harvest. Since 2009 the ILO has called on the Uzbek government to respond to continued reports from workers, employers, and civil society of systematic and persistent use of forced labor of children and adults in Uzbekistan’s cotton fields. Since 2010 the ILO tripartite supervisory body has called on the GOU to invite a high-level tripartite mission to conduct unfettered monitoring during the cotton harvest. In 2012, the ILO offered the Uzbek government an opportunity to take an initial step by inviting an ILO technical assistance team that would monitor during the harvest. The GOU has steadfastly refused to grant access to the ILO.

The government of Uzbekistan continued to harass, intimidate and repress citizens who attempt to monitor the 2012 cotton harvest. Farms were under surveillance by police. Gulshan Karaeva of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU) was arrested on opaque charges of “slander” on September 27, ensuring that she would not be able to report on the cotton harvest as she had done in previous years. Uktam Pardaev of the Independent Human Rights Organization of Uzbekistan was arrested on September 30. On October 20, members of the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan (HRAU) were forced into hiding by local police after they photographed young children picking cotton in the Kashkadarya Region. The national Internet service provider Uztelecom blocked web proxy clients, the only way for the majority of Uzbek people to bypass Internet censorship and to access websites blocked in the country, e.g. www.cottoncampaign.org.

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The review is prepared by the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights and Matthew Fischer-Daly, Cotton Campaign Coordinator, on the results of his visit to Uzbekistan in September 2012.