

## THINK TANK “RAPID RESPONSE GROUP – UZBEKISTAN”

### ABOLITION OF FORCED CHILD LABOR IN COTTON PICKING: HUGE DILEMMA FOR UZBEK GOVERNMENT

Authors: Sukhrobjon Ismoilov, Shukhrat Ganiev and Abdusalom Ergashev

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*“The system of the cotton manufacture in Uzbekistan is very simple: it is based exploitation of the population by the state authorities. Millions of Uzbeks, basically rural population with low incomes, to be exact poverty-stricken groups of people, are engaged in the cotton manufacture just for pennies. They remain in this field because of two principal reasons - either under oppression of the state and under the threat of loss of their position, job or studies, or it is the only source of income at the moment. Those who managed have already quitted everything and left abroad for earnings. We often say “cotton is our main wealth, it is our white gold”. But we do not know how much cotton is annually produced in this country, what are the real selling prices for cotton, what incomes are received from it and how are they spent. From the economic point of view, today it is unprofitable for an Uzbek farmer to produce cotton”*

*- T. Sh. (a former agriculturist, has worked 27 years in the field of agriculture in Denau district of Surkhandarya region).*

The given analysis builds on the results of our monitoring of the cotton picking campaign in Uzbekistan in 2008. Experts of think tank “Rapid Response Group – Uzbekistan” have implemented this monitoring project in Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, Khorezm, Surkhandarya and Fergana regions from September 15<sup>th</sup> to October 18<sup>th</sup> 2008. We have also watched how the issue of cotton campaign was covered on the Uzbek national mass media and independent sources of information.

Abolition of forced child labor in cotton picking is a huge dilemma for the Uzbek government. In reality the measures of the Government along this line have actually deteriorated the situation with the rights of the minors much more and have increased scales of illegal exploitation of the population by the state authorities. The experts think that this deterioration of the situation is first of all related to de-facto recognition by the authorities the fact that it is impossible to pick cotton without engaging those groups of the population, first of all minors, who are not meant for this.

If previously forced engagement of children and other groups of the population (basically people working for the state budgetary organizations) in cotton picking have taken place in a organized centralized way, now it is completely chaotic and forced exploitation during cotton picking season has started covering practically all groups of the population. As a result we witness growth of the scale of illegal exploitation of minors and in general all population. The authorities are inventing more and more refined ways of forcing people to take part in cotton picking.

Cotton-picking season – 2008 became a very special season for Uzbekistan because of several following reasons:

a) On the eve of the cotton season several well-known transnational companies in the world have boycotted the Uzbek cotton because of the use of forced child labor in its picking;

b) In winter of 2008 Uzbekistan has adopted a long-awaited Law “On guarantees of children’s rights”. Moreover, before the cotton season Uzbekistan has ratified the International Labor Organization (ILO) Conventions № 138 (1973) on minimal age for employment and № 182 (1999) concerning the prohibition and immediate action for the elimination of the worst forms of child labor;

c) Right after ratification of the ILO Conventions a National Action Plan on prevention of forced labor, including child labor, have been approved and the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population has been appointed as a state body in charge of the implementation of this Action Plan;

d) The Cabinet of Minister Decree signed by Prime-minister Sh. Mirziyoev has ordered not to involve minor schoolchildren in cotton picking.

We have noted fulfilment of the declared intentions in the beginning of the cotton season. Directors of secondary schools and academic lyceums began to demand written confirmation from the parents of their pupils by which the parents undertook not to send their children to cotton picking. All stakeholders, including international organizations, mass-media and human rights defenders, have ascertained this.

However, the situation changes in mid-September 2008. The head of state has absolutely been clear and categorical on several occasions during his public speeches and signaled that Uzbekistan should fulfill the state target on production of cotton by the end of October, and this target should be reached by any means (the last time statements with such message have been noted during the recent trips of the head of state to Tashkent and Khorezm regions in the beginning of October).

There are five distinctive features in this year’s cotton picking campaign which haven’t been observed in previous years:

- First, growth of the number of minors of youngest ages (pupils of 1<sup>st</sup> grade and 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> grades at secondary schools and academic lyceums) involved in cotton picking;
- Second, growth of the facts of forced labor of those groups of the population which haven’t been previously involved in cotton picking (*mahalla* – local neighborhood – residents, local Muslim religious communities belonging to local mosques, workers of the large state enterprises, and officers of law enforcement agencies);
- Third, unprecedented growth of the level of corruption among the local officials responsible for cotton picking campaign;
- Fourth, the whole process of forced engagement of the population in cotton picking is organized in a chaotic way (almost all groups of the population involved in cotton picking – schoolchildren and students, people working for the state budgetary organizations and large state enterprises, officers of the law enforcement agencies, Muslim religious communities and attendants of the local mosques, *mahalla* residents – all of them take care of their transportation to the cotton field on their own; there is no system of providing appropriate food for people involved in cotton picking at places and most people take care of their food themselves; there is no system of recording the labor results of the people involved in cotton picking, very often it doesn’t matter who is picking how many kilos of cotton everyday; and as a result most people involved in cotton picking get unpaid for their work;

- Fifth, growth of administrative pressure of local *hokimiats* – local government and law enforcement agencies on private farmers (in all regions of monitoring we have received reports telling us that representatives of local *hokimiats* supported by the law enforcement agencies were forcing the private farmers to sign so-called “warning letters” of the following contents. “...because of the expected cold weather and rains in the third decade of October a farmer “name, surname and address of the farmer” is being warned about following. First, local points of reception of the cotton crop accept cotton only until October 21<sup>st</sup>. Second, the farmer should fulfill his obligations under the agreement on producing cotton for the state until October 21<sup>st</sup>. The amount of the part of the agreement which is not fulfilled by the farmer will be withdrawn from his accounts in favor of the local cotton-processing factory. Third, in case the farmer is not in the position of fulfilling his obligations under the agreement on producing cotton, he will be charged under criminal law”. We have copies of such warning letters in our hands).

Our monitoring has revealed the following facts which confirm the aforementioned tendencies:

Minors of school age forcedly involved in cotton picking basically are made up of schoolchildren of 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and up to 11<sup>th</sup> grades of secondary schools or academic lyceums. Since the end of September the authorities started forcedly engaging into cotton picking the schoolchildren of elementary grades – 1<sup>st</sup> and up to 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> grades. Schoolchildren are not provided with transport and everyone is forced to reach the cotton fields independently and at their own expense.

There are already human victims: on October 17<sup>th</sup> 2008 the schoolgirl of the 1<sup>st</sup> grade at school # 11 of Yangiobod settlement of Muzrabot district of Surkhandarya region was hit by the car when she was following to the cotton field without escorts of adults or teachers. She has died on the place of accident. The district authorities have temporarily suspended forced involvement of schoolchildren of elementary grades to cotton picking on that day. The RRG is currently working with the representatives of the victim.

School children involved in forced cotton picking are missing their classes. Representatives of the regional and district branches of the Ministry of Public Education could not answer our question on how they are going to address this problem. The interviewees among the school teachers have clarified to us that when the cotton season ends the schoolchildren will study in two daily shifts in order to overtake the educational program. Schoolchildren will be deprived of their autumn, winter and spring vacations.

Teachers of secondary schools, academic lyceums and professional colleges, including teachers of the 1<sup>st</sup> grades, are forced to pick cotton for up to 15 days. The local authorities are flexible with the teachers – a teacher who can’t pick cotton can either send to the cotton field anybody from his relatives who agrees to pick cotton instead of the teacher, or can hire a person from among *mardikors* (a group of time-workers made up of unemployed people who usually gather in the central squares of cities or district centers and wait when people come and hire them for one-time job) to perform his share in the cotton field.

Growth of the facts of corruption among the representatives of the local government administration is rampant - if schoolchildren miss cotton picking for one day their teacher is forced to pay from 2 up to 3.5 thousand sums (approximately \$ 1,5 - \$ 3 US dollars) as “an informal penalty”. Each schoolchild is obliged to pick 20 - 25 kg of cotton daily on average. The schoolchild who wasn’t able to reach this target either buys cotton from the local farmers or cover it in the money equivalent bringing money to his teacher, his teacher in his turn passes the received money to the representative of the local authorities.

Forced involvement of new groups of the population into cotton picking: the monitoring group has observed facts of forced involvement of such non-traditional groups of the population as workers of the large state industrial enterprises, factories, local Muslim religious communities led by imams who belong to local mosques into cotton picking. The work of the given groups of the population is unpaid, they take care of their own transportation to the cotton fields and food.

We have interviewed *mahalla* chairmen and residents in Surkhandarya, Samarkand, Bukhara and Fergana regions. The local government forced *mahalla* chairmen to get approximately 30 - 40 *mahalla* residents to the cotton fields. In some cases *mahalla* residents were forced to pick cotton for one day, while in other cases for up to 15 days. The work of this group of the population wasn't recorded and paid either. They have taken care of their transportation to the cotton fields and food themselves.

*Mahalla* residents interviewed by us in Surkhandarya and Samarkand regions have reported that *mahalla* chairmen incited by the local authorities have been threatening them that if they refuse picking cotton they will not receive monthly state rations of flour and cotton seed oil the state set quotas per family member of which are provided under state-set prices instead of market prices (because of deficiency of flour and cotton seed oil in Uzbekistan *mahalla* resident is qualified to receive monthly state set quota of flour and oil under state set prices; *mahalla* chairmen are responsible for distribution of monthly quotas of flour and cotton seed oil among the *mahalla* residents).

*Mahalla* chairmen interviewed in Fergana, Khorezm and Surkhandarya regions have noted that if they fail with the task of involving 30 to 40 *mahalla* residents in cotton picking they will have to pay bribes in the amount of 70.000 - 80.000 sums (approximately \$ 65 - \$ 75 US dollars) to the local authorities.

The monitoring group also has noted the following interesting tendencies. Some parents haven't sent their children to cotton picking. Some workers of the state enterprises, state budgetary organizations and factories involved in forced cotton picking have also refused to pick cotton. It should be noted that the authorities didn't persecute them as it has been the case previously. However, the heads of those organizations which were in charge of getting people to the cotton fields (directors of secondary schools, academic lyceums, colleges, institutes and universities, state owned factories and enterprises, heads of state budgetary organizations, *mahalla* chairmen) were held personally responsible before the local *hokimiats*. Monitoring results in Surkhandarya, Samarkand, Bukhara and Khorezm regions have demonstrated that local *hokims* (*governor*) have called daily meetings on the progress of the cotton season. Directors of educational facilities, *mahalla* chairmen, heads of the local state budgetary organizations, heads of state enterprises and factories, and representatives of private farmers are forced to attend such meetings everyday. Such meetings begin usually at 8 o'clock in the evening and proceed until 11 - 12 o'clock midnight. According to our information local *hokims* often offend and apply violence, beatings against the representatives of those organizations which have failed to get needed number of people to cotton picking. We have received the same reports about physical violence and beatings on the side of local *hokims* practically from all regions of monitoring.

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