

**Initiative of a group of Uzbek human rights activists and researchers in partnership  
with the International Labor Rights Forum**



**“We Live Subject to their Orders”:  
A Three-Province Survey of Forced Child Labor in  
Uzbekistan’s 2008 Cotton Harvest**



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## Executive Summary

Uzbekistan is the world's sixth largest producer of cotton, and the third largest exporter. For decades, it has used the forced labor of its schoolchildren starting in the early primary grades, college and university students, and civil servants, to harvest that cotton by hand. Unlike child labor in agricultural sectors in some other countries, this practice is organized and controlled by the central government. Each fall, shortly after the start of the school year, the government orders schools to close and school administrators to send the children out to the fields, where they remain until the cotton harvest is brought in. The current report is based on seventy-two interviews in three different provinces with participants in the fall 2008 harvest.

Since gaining independence in 1991, Uzbekistan's authoritarian government has become more reliant on the use of forced child labor to harvest cotton due to lack of investment or economic reforms in agriculture. The international community paid little attention to this issue amidst Uzbekistan's other severe human rights problems, until local activists in 2004 and 2005 began to call on the world to boycott the cotton, harvested by children, which is exported and sold around the world. These calls began to have an effect in 2007 and 2008, with international brands and retailers including Tesco, Walmart, Target, Levi Strauss, Gap, Limited Brands and Marks and Spencer agreeing to ban Uzbek cotton from their supply chains. In 2008 and early 2009, Uzbekistan signed two ILO conventions against child labor in response to this international campaign.

A further sign that the international campaign is bearing fruit are the government's efforts to convince the international community that it is taking measures to end child labor. In the fall of 2008, Uzbekistan even delayed for a short period the closure of many rural schools in the early primary grades, for about ten days to two weeks past the start of the seasonal harvest. After September 21, however, schoolchildren as young as fifth grade (eleven years old) in the three provinces surveyed were sent out to pick cotton, and most remained in the fields into November. Orders clearly came from provincial governors (*khokims*) to district governors, and from there to district education departments, to individual schools. Schools were assigned quotas to fulfill, and principals of schools that did not meet the quotas were threatened with dismissal. The consequences for children and families who objected to taking part, or for children who did not work to their teachers' satisfaction, were severe: beatings were commonplace. Community government officials, local police officers, and even local prosecutors all pressured parents with an array of tools: denial of pensions or social welfare payments, cutoffs in

electricity, gas or water service, arrests, beatings, temporary detention and even threats of criminal prosecution.

In the fall 2008 harvest children as young as nine, but mostly age 11-14, performed arduous work under hazardous conditions for full work days and then were transported back to their local schools and allowed to go home for the night. Children fourteen and older were housed in unsanitary field sheds for the duration of the picking season. There were no days off. Though the government set a recommended rate of pay, farmers often underpaid the pupils, and school administrators withheld portions of it with impunity. Children were largely responsible for bringing their own food and water; many drank from irrigation canals in the fields. Injuries and illnesses were commonplace, and those reported by survey respondents included viral hepatitis infections and other diseases transmitted by contaminated food and water, and injuries sustained while children were transported to the fields in unsafe tractor-pulled carts intended to transport raw cotton. No compensation was provided to the families of injured children; on the contrary, those that complained were threatened with repercussions. Aside from the risks to children's health and well-being, rural children's education was severely curtailed.

The field interviews clearly show that parents, children, teachers and even farmers whose livelihoods are aided all deplore the forced labor of children. This suggests root causes of the problem in Uzbekistan are not poverty, tradition or lack of schooling, as can be true in other countries. The problem is rooted in the nature of the industry and state control over rural populations. Respondents noted that the large numbers of unemployed people in their communities could be mobilized to pick cotton only if it paid a reasonable wage; thousands of Uzbek citizens migrate to neighboring countries each season to do the very same work that they disdain at home because it is so poorly paid. Children, however, are more easily subject to state pressure.

The government's action in delaying its mobilization of children in the 2008 harvest clearly shows that the practice, if the government so desires, can be stopped. Efforts that suggest the need to educate farmers, parents or teachers are misguided and risk deflecting attention from the problem's real root causes. The international community needs to vastly increase its efforts to monitor the cotton harvest and hold the Government of Uzbekistan accountable to end forced adult and child labor.

## Introduction

### *Background*

The practice of mobilizing schoolchildren and university students to harvest cotton began in Soviet times. As the Soviet state industrialized, demand for cotton grew, and the acreage planted under cotton expanded greatly. By 1991, 65% of Uzbekistan's arable land was planted with cotton. From the post-1945 period observers classified Uzbekistan's agriculture as a monoculture; Uzbekistan's major function within the autarkic Soviet economy was to supply cotton. Cotton not only dominated the economy but prevailed as a leitmotif of the region's culture. State propaganda cast each harvest in military terminology, and emphasized the importance of each citizen taking part in the battle on the cotton front. Below are two state emblems adopted for the Uzbek SSR and for contemporary Uzbekistan. In both cases cotton occupies an essential part of the national symbolism and is supposed to be the subject of national pride.

The ecological destruction wrought by the cotton monoculture as well as the use of forced labor to harvest it became subjects for media discussion and public discontent during the late Soviet period of liberalization, or *glasnost*, under Mikhail Gorbachev. At the same time, the famous "Cotton Affair" of the mid- and late-1980s which led to the arrest of current and former Uzbek leaders exposed the massive falsification of harvest figures and private profiteering reaching into the highest echelons of the Soviet government. By the turn of the decade, public pressure was building to reduce the role of cotton in the regional economy.



However, after 1991, the loss of subsidies from the collapsed Soviet state made newly independent Uzbekistan even more dependent on the hard currency it could earn via cotton, its dominant export. Currently, Uzbekistan is the world's sixth largest producer of cotton, and its second or third major exporter.<sup>1</sup> In addition, incomplete economic reforms since independence have if anything deepened the reliance on manual labor, and particularly on forced child labor. Investment in the sector has lagged and Soviet-era harvesting machinery has fallen into disrepair, leaving nearly all of Uzbekistan's cotton harvested by hand. The process of partial privatization, while formally breaking up collective farms and creating nominally independent farmers, has not removed the system of mandatory state orders that farmers must fulfill. These orders usually equal to or exceed the amount farmers produce; farmers cannot opt out as the state controls the distribution of land as well as other inputs (such as water, seed, fertilizer and fuel). As the farm-gate price for cotton is set artificially low, the state deploys forced labor, of schoolchildren, students and state-sector workers.<sup>2</sup> This practice not only obviates the need to pay adult wage laborers, but also serves to ensure that farmers do not seek to increase their profits by withholding cotton for sale across borders where it might command a better price. The central collection of cotton by captive workers ensures the state-owned companies fully control collection and distribution of all cotton harvested.

These practices are at odds with national law. Uzbekistan's independence-era constitution and domestic labor codes prohibit child labor and forced labor. Article 17 of the labor code establishes the minimum age of labor as 16. Uzbekistan has also since independence become a signatory to international treaties and conventions that prohibit the use of both child and forced labor, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1983, ratified in 1994). When confronted with the evidence it routinely breaks these laws, Uzbekistan's government tends to deny the problem outright or claim that it has already been resolved.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UNCTAD statistics, <http://r0.unctad.org/infocomm/anglais/cotton/market.htm>. According to the Gdynia Cotton Association, Uzbekistan in 2007 produced nearly a million tons of cotton lint, used 300,000 tons in domestic industry and exported the rest. Press release, October 12, 2007. <http://www.gca.org.pl/x.php/2,440/International-Cotton-Conference-and-Cotton-Fair-in-Uzbekistan.html>

<sup>2</sup> Kandiyoti, Deniz. *Invisible to the World? The Dynamics of Forced Labor in the Cotton Sector of Uzbekistan*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Reacting to Switzerland and the Netherland's recommendations at the 2008 Working group on the UN Third Universal Periodic Review that the government take measures to eliminate forced child labor, Uzbekistan's delegation claimed that "[those] recommendations are pertaining to measures already being implemented or

Though the international community has consistently scrutinized Uzbekistan's weak record on human rights, and challenged the government on such issues as torture and the large numbers of people it imprisons for political and religious dissent, the mass mobilization of children for hard agricultural labor escaped without much comment for over a decade. International financial institutions and partner governments created aid programs to assist with agricultural reforms without confronting the issue; UNICEF, present in the country since 1994, published several large survey reports on women and children's status without mentioning that nearly all rural schoolchildren are taken out of school for weeks or months at a time and forced to pick cotton.<sup>4</sup> As late as 2006, international organizations could address the question of children's rights without even noting children's forced labor in this sector.<sup>5</sup> The phenomenon was truly, as noted in one recent scholarly publication, "invisible to the world."<sup>6</sup> This began to change as Uzbekistan's journalists and human rights activists started to draw world attention to this widespread violation of children's rights. A group of eighteen organizations and activists first called on the international community, in late 2004, to boycott cotton from Uzbekistan.<sup>7</sup> Other rights groups, both those in exile and based in Uzbekistan, renewed that call in 2008.<sup>8</sup>

As international attention to Uzbekistan's use of forced child labor has mounted in recent years, particularly after the airing of a BBC documentary in October 2007,<sup>9</sup> major international retailers have responded to activists' calls, and several, including the UK-based Tesco and Marks and Spencer, and US

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which had already been implemented and will be further considered by the Government." Child Rights Information Network, <http://www.crin.org/resources/infoDetail.asp?ID=19626>

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF, *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey*, 2006.

[http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/MICS3\\_Uzbekistan\\_FinalReport\\_2006\\_en.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/MICS3_Uzbekistan_FinalReport_2006_en.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> OMCT, "*Rights of the Child in Uzbekistan*," alternative report submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, [http://www.omct.org/pdf/cc/2006/report/report\\_children\\_uzbekistan\\_eng.pdf](http://www.omct.org/pdf/cc/2006/report/report_children_uzbekistan_eng.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Kandiyoti, Deniz, op cit.

<sup>7</sup> IWPR, "*Further growth in Uzbek child labor*," June 18, 2004,

[http://www.iwpr.net/?s=f&o=175886&p=rca&l=EN&apc\\_state=hena-cotton%20uzbekistan](http://www.iwpr.net/?s=f&o=175886&p=rca&l=EN&apc_state=hena-cotton%20uzbekistan) 3

[publish date 1 10 compact 81](http://www.iwpr.net/?s=f&o=162102&p=rca&l=EN&apc_state=hena-cotton%20uzbekistan); IWPR, "*Investigation: 'Patriotic' Uzbek child laborers*," December 10, 2004. [http://www.iwpr.net/?s=f&o=162102&p=rca&l=EN&apc\\_state=hena-cotton%20uzbekistan](http://www.iwpr.net/?s=f&o=162102&p=rca&l=EN&apc_state=hena-cotton%20uzbekistan) 3

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<sup>8</sup> <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=40679>

<sup>9</sup> *Child labour and the High Street*, *Newsnight*, 30 October 2007, 18:12 GMT, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/7068096.stm>

based Walmart, Gap, Levi Strauss and Limited Brands have made public commitments to keep Uzbekistan's child-harvested cotton out of their supply chains. In turn, Uzbekistan has increased its efforts to portray itself in a better light. In 2008, it acceded to two important International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions: 138, on The Minimum Age for Work, and 182, on Prohibition and Immediate Action on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child labor.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, these efforts could not blunt the effect of reports from the region that children were still being forced out into the fields. In late 2008 several more major international retailers and US and European retail associations appealed to the Uzbek government to stop the use of forced child labor, and to the ILO to monitor the government's adherence to its commitments.<sup>11</sup>

This is the third in a series of reports documenting the mass mobilization of schoolchildren by the government of Uzbekistan for forced labor in the country's cotton agriculture. A network of Uzbekistan human rights activists, and researchers joined together to produce this report. For their safety, they have elected to remain anonymous, publishing this report in cooperation with the International Labor Rights Forum.

The first two reports detailed forced child labor practices in the fall 2007 harvest and the spring 2008 planting season.<sup>12</sup> The authors produced a brief update in the fall of 2008, when initial testimony from the fields clearly showed that the Uzbek government's claims to have halted the practice were false. The current report uses extensive interview data to show that the forced mobilization of schoolchildren by the government in the 2008 harvest season was a massive, centrally-orchestrated state effort which did not substantially differ from those in years past.

However, international attention to Uzbekistan's use of forced child labor and pressure to stop the practice has clearly had some effect. Rather than closing schools shortly after the commencement

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<sup>10</sup> Uzbekistan completed its deposit of ILO 182 with the International Labour Organization in July 2008; ILO 138 was signed in 2008 but not deposited until March 2009.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/1362991c-8f07-11dd-946c-0000779fd18c.html>; also letters from Business and Social Compliance Initiative and US retail associations to President Karimov and ILO Director General Juan Somavia, on file at ILRF.

<sup>12</sup> **Survey Report on Child Labor in Uzbekistan**, April 01, 2008, Uzbek Human Rights Activists and Journalists, <http://www.laborrights.org/stop-child-labor/cotton-campaign/resources/1685>; **Forced Child Labor in Uzbekistan's 2008 Spring Agricultural Season**, October 10, 2008, International Labor Rights Forum and Human Rights Defenders in Uzbekistan, <http://www.laborrights.org/stop-child-labor/cotton-campaign/resources/1751>; **Child Labor in Fall 2008 Uzbek Cotton Harvest**, November 11, 2008, International Labor Rights Forum, <http://www.laborrights.org/stop-child-labor/cotton-campaign/resources/1843>

of the academic year in the first half of September, as is the usual practice, the government delayed children's mobilization by two to three weeks. Having in early September instructed the localities that children were *not* to be used in this year's harvest, the provincial governors notified local education departments around September 21<sup>st</sup> that school should be closed for children in the upper elementary grades, and that those children should be sent to the cotton fields.

## *Methodology*

Researchers chose four rural districts within three provinces in which to monitor the use of child labor: one each in Samarkand and Bukhara and two districts in Khorezm province. To protect the identities of the respondents, the districts and specific locations will not be identified. These three provinces have not been surveyed in the past and therefore were chosen in order to develop over time a comprehensive picture of practices country-wide. Samarkand, Bukhara and Khorezm are all significant cotton producers among Uzbekistan's regions; in 2004 they were the third, fifth and seventh of Uzbekistan's twelve regions by gross regional product.<sup>13</sup>

In each of these localities, the authors took semi-standardized interviews from at least five representatives of the major stakeholder groups in this process: farmers, parents, teachers, and the schoolchildren themselves, seventy-two interviews in all. Though due to the number of interviews taken the report cannot claim statistical validity for the data, comparisons with news sources and other anecdotal reports from the 2008 harvest suggest that they are broadly representative of the country as a whole. A translation of the questionnaire is included at the end of the report as an Appendix. Interviews were conducted at the very end of, or just shortly after the end of the season's cotton harvest, rather than while cotton picking was still in progress, in order to avoid official suspicion. Interviewers informed the subjects, who were chosen both at random and via interviewers' social networks, of the purpose of the discussion. Subjects were promised anonymity, though the interviews were carried out in public places. Local researchers, including human rights activists, then compiled and summarized that interview data; the final report was produced with the assistance of an international editor. The photographs in this report were taken during the fall 2008 harvest by the research group, with the exception of that on p. 12 which belongs to the Alliance of Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan.

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<sup>13</sup> "*Uzbekistan in Figures*," UNDP, [http://www.statistics.uz/data\\_finder/257/](http://www.statistics.uz/data_finder/257/)

## Children’s work on the 2008 Harvest

*‘First we forbade the children from going out into the fields, and then we chased them out there to pick cotton’*

On September 12, at a time when in years past schoolchildren might already be in the fields, the Cabinet of Ministers issued a resolution on the implementation of two ILO conventions signed earlier in the year: “On measures to implement the Conventions on the Minimum age for Work and On the Prohibition and Immediate Action on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor.”<sup>14</sup> The resolution itself simply noted instructions to create governmental working groups to carry out a so-called National Action Plan to put the obligations undertaken in the Conventions into practice. The publication of the resolution, however, was one of the first public signals in Uzbekistan that the government was engaged in any sort of review of this practice.



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<sup>14</sup> **Convention 182**, on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, was signed and ratified in March, 2008. **Convention 138**, on the Prohibition and Immediate Action on the Elimination of the Worst forms of Child Labor was signed in March but ratified only in late 2008 when the National Action Plan was filed with the ILO. The text of the Cabinet of Ministers resolution is attached to this report as Appendix B.

Correspondingly, provincial governments held meetings to discuss what seemed to be a new policy: to avoid using schoolchildren, at least those younger than 16, in the harvest.<sup>15</sup> State officials transmitted those instructions via education departments down to the level of local schools.

Many pupils were overjoyed at the fact that this year, their only responsibility would be to learn their lessons well. “On the first day of the school year, the Day of Knowledge, our school principal told us that this year schoolchildren would not take part in the cotton harvest, and that there was a state decree... He even criticized students who went out to pick cotton after school,” reported one.<sup>16</sup> “At first we were so happy that this year, it seemed, there would be no cotton picking for us,” said another young pupil. “At the meeting which marked the beginning of the school year, the director of our school, [name withheld] wished us good luck in our studies, and also said that this year we would not be called to harvest cotton. Representatives of the district education department who were present at the meeting also told us that now schoolchildren would not be sent out for cotton picking.”<sup>17</sup>

For the first two to three weeks of the harvest, respondents stated that for the most part, young children were not in the fields in the provinces surveyed.<sup>18</sup> Press reports from other provinces, however, indicate that tenth and eleventh graders, and even some younger children were sent out to the fields at nearly the same time as the decree was issued, in the second week of September when the harvest began.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Uzbekistan’s domestic law permits children to work after age 16, and from ages 14-16 under restricted hours and conditions. Tenth and eleventh graders (ages 16 and up) reportedly were not held back at the start of the season, and so were out picking from September 5 (Samarkand parent 3).

<sup>16</sup> Bukhara pupil 4.

<sup>17</sup> Samarkand pupil 5.

<sup>18</sup> In 2005-2007, Uzbekistan’s state schools largely switched from eleven year comprehensive schools, to nine year elementary schooling, followed by three years of high school, grades 10-12. Twelve years of education is compulsory according to law but not universally practiced or enforced. Children start first grade at age six, and then complete the elementary years to ninth grade by ages 15 or 16. They usually follow on to grades 10-12 at a “Lycee” to prepare for higher education or more commonly at a technical-vocational high school (often called a “college”). In the 2008 harvest, the elementary school grades involved in cotton picking correspond to ages 9 (grade three) to age 15 (grade nine).

<sup>19</sup> “*Deti na poliakh Uzbekistana: zaiiavleniia detei raskhodiatsia s delom*,” September 16 2008, Fergana.ru, <http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=5856>.



However, after September 22, schoolchildren in two of the three provinces surveyed were sent en masse to the fields; October 1 saw the children of the third province also directed to pick cotton. The about-face was sudden and unexplained. One teacher noted the discomfort caused by this reversal:

At the start of the academic year we were told that this year the children won't be brought out to pick cotton. They even told the parents that they shouldn't let their children go out to the fields to pick it after school—the government has created this policy, they were told. A few parents even raised a fuss with us, saying that they are their children and only they should decide what they should do [after school], whether they will go out or sit at home. After the situation changed, we were ashamed. It was really strange—first we forbade the children from going out into the fields, and then we chased them out there to pick cotton.<sup>20</sup>

The table below summarizes the length of the harvest season in each province and the ages of the pupils involved.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bukhara teacher 4.

<sup>21</sup> Only elementary school pupils grades nine and under were interviewed for this research. However, in the course of interviewing schoolchildren, teachers and parents it became clear that pupils in the final elementary grades (aged 15-18), in lycees or “colleges,” are universally called upon to take part in the harvest as well as are students in institutions of higher learning. While schoolchildren to grade nine are usually brought out to the fields and back each day (one exception was found among schools represented in our survey, where eighth and ninth graders, or children of 14 and 15, were housed in the fields), upper grades as well as higher education students are usually housed in barracks in the fields for the duration of the season.

	Date begun	Elementary Grades mobilized	Date ended	Days in the field
Bukhara	September 22	8 <sup>th</sup> -9 <sup>th</sup> , 6 <sup>th</sup> -7 <sup>th</sup> grades after shortened school day, 5 <sup>th</sup> graders for 2 weeks	November 1	39
Khorezm A	October 1	6 <sup>th</sup> -9 <sup>th</sup> grade; some 5 <sup>th</sup> graders	November 11	41
Khorezm B	October 10	4 <sup>th</sup> -9 <sup>th</sup> grade; 3 <sup>rd</sup> graders out after school hours	November 10	31
Samarkand	September 22	8 <sup>th</sup> -9 <sup>th</sup> , with 6 <sup>th</sup> -7 <sup>th</sup> out after shortened school day	October 20 or 22	28-30

Any analysis of this about-face must be speculative in the absence of direct testimony from decision-makers within the central government or those with access to decision-makers. It is possible that the initial child labor prohibition represented a sincere but inadequately prepared effort to change long-established practices, which foundered when state authorities had not put in place any alternative plan to bring in the harvest. It may be that different ministries or figures within the government were operating at cross purposes. Another possibility is that the Prime Minister issued this decree in order to convince Western observers that Uzbekistan was indeed eradicating forced child labor at the start of the harvest when attention was likely to be greater, when in fact the intention all along was to revert to the habitual exploitation of children. What is clear from testimony is that regional governments were totally unprepared to bring in the harvest without forcing children's participation.

### *Chain of command*

What is equally clear is that the same government that ratified ILO conventions months before directly ordered schools to close and to force children to bring in the cotton harvest. When asked who gives the orders to send the children out to the fields, teachers answer forthrightly: "It's the provincial education department, and the district education department. And the [education] ministry is aware of this."<sup>22</sup> The province's educational bureaucracy is directly subject to the provincial governor, or *khokim*,

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<sup>22</sup> Bukhara teacher 2, interviewed November 30, 2008.

who has near dictatorial powers over all agencies and institutions within his realm, much more so than the national education ministry.<sup>23</sup> Who gives the orders is equally transparent to parents and pupils: “The *khokim* gives the orders, and the police and prosecutor’s office, and the provincial education department, together with the *khokim*’s office carry them out.”<sup>24</sup>

The provincial *khokim* issues the initial order to the district *khokim*, who then instructs his district education department, and through them, each individual school. But ultimately school principals are called to account before the *khokim*, and each principal fears being summoned to the district executive office. Each province must meet the quota for its portion of the national cotton plan, so each district and its *khokim* is responsible before the provincial executive. When a district does not fulfill its harvest quota, as occurred in the rural districts surveyed for this research in Khorezm (a), the pressure on schools may be intense. Schools in this district sent out third graders (children who are eight and nine years old) to the fields.

It can be surmised that the district education departments assign a picking quota to each school. School principals act as though they are responsible for showing that the school as a whole brought in a certain amount of cotton, as if the school has been assigned a set amount it must achieve. It is the principals who seek out opportunities to pick cotton, and not farmers who come to schools in search of laborers. “Our principal went around to the farms and begged them to take the pupils,” reported one teacher.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, the principals are actively involved in monitoring the amount picked by the school; several teachers reported that their principals brought each day’s totals personally to the district *khokim*’s office. By all accounts, 2008’s cotton crop was a poor one, largely due to low rainfall, and so many districts did not actually fulfill their assigned quotas. This fact in turn increased pressure on farmers and especially on pickers, assigned to meet quotas for cotton not actually in the fields. Two teachers reported that farmers “took pity on” their schools, and ascribed to them a larger total amount than their schoolchildren actually picked.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> This same teacher reported raising the question of children’s forced participation in the cotton harvest with the Minister of Education at a 2002 meeting, and being told “If it was up to us, then we wouldn’t send the children to pick cotton. But you must understand, this is the policy.”

<sup>24</sup> Bukhara parent 1

<sup>25</sup> Khorezm B teacher 5.

<sup>26</sup> Khoresm B teacher 4; Bukhara teacher 4, interviewed 29 November 2008.

Finally, teachers universally report that the principals were greatly concerned with their pupils' attendance in the fields, and with the pupils meeting their daily assigned totals. In the words of one teacher, "They yell at the principal in the *khokim's* office; the director then yells at us and we yell at the children. They yell at him so much in the *khokim's* office, and threaten to fire him. We are forced to come out to the harvest because we fear losing our jobs."<sup>27</sup> In the 2008 harvest season relatively few children, according to respondents, were excused for illness. "If they can walk," one teacher reported her principal as commanding, "they should be in the fields, picking." School principals faced real pressure not only from their own education department superiors and the district executive, but from law enforcement officials as well:

I've never seen such a cruel cotton harvest. At the end of the season a few pupils from school [name and number withheld] didn't come out to the fields. The district prosecutor as a result called a big meeting and publicly fired the principal. Even though he is over sixty years old, and well-respected. The prosecutor screamed at the police chief, 'Send him to jail if you have to!'<sup>28</sup>

In this atmosphere, principals did not allow even those who had met their daily picking quotas to leave the fields, for fear of being castigated by *khokimiat* personnel. Indeed, even *when all the cotton in the fields had already been picked*, principals required their pupils to come out to the fields, presumably in order to demonstrate that the school was making every effort to fulfill the plan. "I picked about 10-15 kilos at the start of the season, 7-10 in the middle, and 5-8 at the end, that is, when there was still some cotton. After that we just came to the fields and sat there. The assistant principal came and made sure we didn't run away," one pupil commented.<sup>29</sup>

### *Coercion*

The government of Uzbekistan sometimes claims that any children found working in the fields must be there of their own accord, out of a sense of duty to their nation, or gratitude. Testimony from teachers, parents, and schoolchildren themselves makes absolutely plain that this is not the case:

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<sup>27</sup> Khorezm A teacher 1

<sup>28</sup> Samarkand parent 4.

<sup>29</sup> Khorezm B, pupil 3.

*Interviewer: If pupils say that they are not going to go out and pick cotton, do the teachers scold them?*

Respondent: They beat them.

*Interviewer: How do they beat them, exactly?*

Respondent: They slap them, or pull their ears. They will hang their pictures up on the Board of Laggard Pupils. During class they will put them in the corner and make them hold up a chair. They will abuse them during the parent meeting.

Pupils commonly reported corporal punishment used against those reluctant to report to the fields as well as those not working to the satisfaction of their teacher-monitors. Teachers interviewed for this report responded honestly about their use of corporal punishment, sometimes noting that principals told them directly to “have no mercy” toward children who did not work hard enough.<sup>30</sup>

In 2008, students and teachers reported for the first time that police and local prosecutorial officials were seen monitoring the fields, a step that would be unnecessary if the pickers were there voluntarily.

Despite the chilling penalties exacted against children for non-compliance, there are those parents who attempt to have their children excused from the harvest, or who simply hold them back. Those families can expect, at the least, home visits from teachers to persuade them to send their children to the fields. If this technique does not succeed in convincing parents, principals generally deploy other means of coercion, reporting the families to the local community organization, or *mahalla*.<sup>31</sup> The *mahalla* can revoke social benefit payments, can call parents to be shamed in a community meeting, or can even cut off water, electricity and gas service to their home. One parent reported that the *mahalla* even threatened to plow under families’ garden plots, which are essential to their survival.<sup>32</sup> Law enforcement officials may become involved:

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<sup>30</sup> Samarkand teacher 4.

<sup>31</sup> The *mahalla* is traditionally a local community self-government body the nature of which has become transformed in the period of independence. “Under President Karimov, the Uzbek government has converted the *mahalla* committees from an autonomous expression of self-government to a national system for surveillance and control.” See Human Rights Watch, *From House to House: Abuses by the Mahalla Committees* (New York: September, 2003), <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2003/09/22/house-house>. *Mahallas* function as the lowest rung of the chain of executive power, carrying out orders of the district *khokim*, who in effect appoints their personnel.

<sup>32</sup> Bukhara parent 1.

The local beat cop has many means of influence at his disposal. Last year the grandson of [name withheld] didn't come out to pick cotton, a ninth grader. They said that he was sick. Well, his father was called in to the district center and held there for two days in the police lockup. The police started to threaten that they would frame him for some unsolved robberies or even as a member of the religious group the Wahabis. It turns out that the grandfather and the whole family is very religious. Well, the guy immediately backed down and stopped objecting.<sup>33</sup>

In areas where the harvest was poor, pressure faced by education departments and school principals to fulfill what may have been unrealistic targets led them to subject their pupils to extreme humiliation. "They berated us in school if we didn't reach the daily norms. Every morning before we got on the bus we gathered in the school courtyard and the assistant principal took us to task. The pupils who hadn't met the norms had to step in front and get dressed down. They said we were shaming our motherland in her time of need. We understand that there wasn't enough rain, and that we're not at fault."<sup>34</sup>

Schoolchildren reported that they faced not only beatings and public shaming and humiliation, but poor grades or even expulsion if they refused to pick cotton or did not meet daily picking quotas. Some teachers indicated that they assigned grades in pupils' official school records for the period of the harvest according to how much cotton the pupils actually picked.<sup>35</sup>

Respondents indicated that in the 2008 harvest season, school officials were much more reluctant than usual to excuse children from the harvest in exchange for bribes, or on the basis of medical certificates, whether real or purchased, as indicated above. "Tell your parents not to go out and get any sort of doctors' notes," one girl reported her principal as saying, "because everyone is

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<sup>33</sup> Bukhara teacher 1. Uzbekistan criminalizes religious as well as secular political dissent, and has jailed thousands of its own citizens, groundlessly accusing them of being religious radicals intent on overthrowing the state. Once so accused, conviction is assured. "Wahabi" is a reference to the dominant Islamic school of Saudi Arabia, which the Soviet state feared had infiltrated and radicalized its Muslim population in the 1970s. In current day Uzbekistan it is a catch-all term encompassing any Muslim believer more devout than is deemed socially acceptable. See Human Rights Watch, *Creating Enemies of the State: Religious Persecution in Uzbekistan* (New York: March, 2004), <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2004/03/29/creating-enemies-state>

<sup>34</sup> Khorezm B, pupil 4.

<sup>35</sup> Khorezm A, pupil 4.

going out.”<sup>36</sup> At least one school held its own special medical commission, to ascertain whether pupils were genuinely physically unable to participate, or just malingering.<sup>37</sup> Even so, some children were allowed to sit out the harvest, and those included “the children of the people who work in the *khokim*’s office,” according to one teacher.<sup>38</sup> For the rest, even minor absences could elicit severe recrimination and retribution from teachers. “One day I couldn’t come to the fields because I had to help prepare for a family event. Our class director came and started to holler. She shouted that she could be fired because of me, and who would then feed her children. After that she went to see my dad, and then left [when it was agreed the girl would go to the field]. But she was mad at me all day and found fault with everything I did.”<sup>39</sup>

The government in some areas was particularly sensitive in the 2008 harvest to avoid the appearance of coercing labor of those children in grades seven and under, in other words, those younger than fourteen years of age. Nevertheless, the participation of pupils younger than 14 (including, as noted above, that of children as young as third grade, or eight to nine years of age) was also coerced. A teacher from Bukhara explained:

Regarding the sixth and seventh graders, the district education office gave orders to talk to parents and try to *persuade* them. They said, let the sixth and seventh grade pupils get out to pick cotton for a couple of weeks, and we will make sure they have good conditions. Therefore we began to work over the parents. But who wants to take such little babies out to the fields?<sup>40</sup>

Despite the teacher’s reservations, parents in this teachers’ school were “persuaded” to allow their children thirteen and under to work picking cotton. Respondents in other areas reported that the state-sponsored youth organization *Kamolot* and other government-controlled public associations also agitated parents on the need to send out sixth and seventh grade pupils.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Samarkand, pupil 2. Reportedly in Samarkand province such medical certificates cost 20,000 sum (approximately 14 US dollars), just slightly under the minimum monthly wage.

<sup>37</sup> Khorezm B teacher 2

<sup>38</sup> Khorezm B, teacher 1.

<sup>39</sup> Khorezm B, pupil 2.

<sup>40</sup> Bukhara teacher 1.

<sup>41</sup> Bukhara teacher 3. *Kamolot* is the post-independence successor of the Komsomol, or Communist Youth League.

The relative lack of public protest against children's forced labor on the cotton harvest can in no way be interpreted as "social acceptance" of the phenomenon, or as evidence of the voluntary nature of children's labor. Children responding to this survey, in conditions where they were reasonably assured that their responses would be anonymous, uniformly expressed their dislike or even detestation of the annual ritual. "I hate this work. It would be so much better to study in school and get an education," said one.<sup>42</sup> Even those who agreed that the money they earned, though extremely little, provided some assistance to their families were bitterly aware of the cost to their education. "We would be learning something in school. We are wasting time here," said another.<sup>43</sup>

The parents interviewed likewise felt the injustice of the system that forces their children to risk their health and lose precious months of schooling. Even those parents who in principle did not oppose children working (in the hours after school) objected that they should spend their time after school in activities that benefit family enterprises, not other farmers. The great majority of parent respondents underlined their bitter dissatisfaction with this system. One outlined the Faustian bargain he made, sending his small son out to pick cotton, though his health is not good, in order to avoid consequences for his newly opened business:

If I object to my son's participation in the cotton harvest, then they can take this workshop away from me. It's better to try to live without problems...It's that serious. The police chief, the district prosecutor, the *khokim* are all in the fields all day and night. They meet at midnight in their headquarters to discuss the results of the day's work, and call in the farmers. Therefore, we just have to be happy with what we have.<sup>44</sup>

Parents recognize their helplessness in the face of official might. When faced with threats to plow under their garden plots (the critical means of subsistence for rural families) or cut off electricity, "we can't say anything."<sup>45</sup> Sheer pragmatism prevents most expressions of protest. One teacher put it succinctly, "to whom, exactly, should we protest, if at the top of the whole system stand the *khokim*, the prosecutor and the police chief? Not to mention those occupying even higher positions! To whom

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<sup>42</sup> Khorezm A pupil 1.

<sup>43</sup> Khorezm A, pupil 2.

<sup>44</sup> Bukhara parent 3.

<sup>45</sup> Bukhara parent 1.

should these unfortunate parents go to complain—to the prosecutor or to the *khokim*, who are the very ones who head the whole effort to force schoolchildren out to pick cotton?”<sup>46</sup>

### *Conditions in the fields*

Overall, children faced hazardous conditions during their work, which they performed for scant and unreliable pay. As the children interviewed for this report were in the ninth grade and younger, with one exception they were brought to the fields every morning and sent home at night. We found evidence that one school in the Samarkand region sent its eighth and ninth grade children to board at the farms where they worked during the week, sleeping in field storage barns.<sup>47</sup> Children and parents interviewed indicated that the tenth and eleventh graders they knew (the terminal years of high school, during which children may be 16-18 years of age) were uniformly housed in field barracks for the duration of the picking season, as were college and university students. The ninth-grade respondent described the conditions as “unbearable”: the unheated, un-insulated field barracks, normally used to store crops and/or farm machinery, were filthy and flea-infested, while the biting insects prevented them from sleeping. Children were fed mostly bread and turnips.



Schoolchildren usually were deployed in fields belonging to different farmers over the course of the season. Some of those fields may have been reasonably close to the schoolyards where they gathered in the mornings, others as much as 20 km (12 miles) distant. The greatest distance children

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<sup>46</sup> Samarkand teacher 2.

<sup>47</sup> Samarkand pupil 3.

reported walking to the fields was 6-7 km (4 miles); beyond this distance they were usually transported by bus, or, more commonly, tractor-pulled wagon. The wagons, the same ones used to transport cotton to the collection points, are not meant for passenger transport and even when in good repair routinely overturn or cause falls resulting in injuries or even death. In the 2008 season, two injuries from a fall from these wagons, resulting in permanent disabilities, were reported by our interview subjects (see below). At times, to save on fuel costs, farmers would provide transportation to the fields, but leave children to walk home in the evenings. In most cases, farmers covered the cost of transportation themselves (sometimes passing it on to the pupils by docking their pay), but in some instances, schools particularly desperate to make their contribution to the harvest arranged for the local education department or village council to cover the costs.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to transportation costs, pupils also had their pay docked at time to cover the cost of meals provided by the farmers, although farmers agreed to provide food only infrequently. A few fed the children occasionally at their own expense. In the past, before the rapid inflation of food costs in recent years, collective farms would receive allocations of funds to cover the cost of nutritious meals containing a variety of foods, including meat. However in 2008, whether or not farmers used their own funds or deducted the amount from the children's earnings, the quality of food provided (when it was provided at all) was poor, and consisted mostly of noodles and cabbage. Most often, children ate only what their families were able to pack for them; many reported that they had only bread to eat, and were hungry.<sup>49</sup>

Children and teachers reported that farmers seldom if ever provided clean drinking water in the fields, and so children were responsible for bringing their own water with them for the day. When water was provided, it was not boiled. Rarely was piped water available close to the fields; children reportedly had to drink water from irrigation canals on a regular basis, though sometimes their teachers warned them against this.

Respondents reported that schoolchildren worked a full day, usually gathering at eight am in the schoolyard, and being dismissed at five pm or later. Transportation home from the fields, or walking long distances meant sometimes children would not arrive home until 7pm, after dark. Children worked

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<sup>48</sup> Samarkand farmer 1.

<sup>49</sup> Samarkand parent 2.

without breaks or weekends. In fact, some reported that on Sundays all of the children in their schools, from every grade, were made to come to the fields to pick cotton.<sup>50</sup>

The rate recommended by the Cabinet of Ministers to compensate workers on the cotton harvest, according to respondents, was 60 sum per kilogram picked.<sup>51</sup> Those interviewed reported that farmers paid children this amount, at least at the beginning of the picking season. However, fairly soon thereafter many farmers paid the children much less, even as little as half that amount. Some farmers refused to pay anything. Several children reported having portions of their pay withheld under various pretexts: to cover transportation and food costs, as a forced contribution to the school, or for no reason at all. One teacher reported the district education department ordering that 10 sum per kilogram picked be withheld and transferred directly to it.<sup>52</sup>

On average, the children interviewed for this survey earned much less for their work than the official rate of pay would indicate. It is unclear, however, whether or not farmers took advantage of children's relative defenselessness and reduced rates paid to schoolchildren any more than they did with adult workers. However, schoolchildren are uniquely vulnerable to economic exploitation by the school itself. One school reportedly demanded financial contributions from the students in order to purchase cotton to make up for the shortfall in its quota, as there was not enough cotton remaining in the fields to be picked.<sup>53</sup>

Cases of accident or injury in the harvest underline the defenselessness of children and families, and make clear their lack of any recourse. On the contrary, efforts to gain assistance may make families vulnerable to further exploitation, extortion and bribe-taking. Uzbek families are left to face the consequences of these preventable tragedies entirely on their own. Three of the seventy two interview subjects had observed serious injuries first hand. In one case, a classmate contracted acute hepatitis

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<sup>50</sup> School is usually held for ½ day on Saturday.

<sup>51</sup> The Uzbek *sum* is officially trades at 1,449 to the US dollar, but on the black market fetches much less, at 1,600-1,700 per US dollar. At the official rate, 60 Uzbek sum is equivalent to .04 US dollars, or four cents. An average daily amount reported picked by the children, or 20 kilograms, would (if compensated at the officially recommended rate) yield .83 US dollars.

<sup>52</sup> Khorezm A, teacher 4.

<sup>53</sup> Khorezm B, teacher 5. This is a fairly common form of corruption by which cotton gins re-allocate the excess cotton they amass by cheating some farmers on reported weights, and selling that cotton to those farms or other institutions which have not met their assigned targets. Bukhara farmer 3, an interview subject, reported having to sell livestock and vegetable crops in order to earn money with which to buy extra cotton from the gin so that he could officially meet the obligatory state order.

which the district hospital linked to exposure to agricultural chemicals.<sup>54</sup> “I don’t think they gave any money. The farmer gave the local taxi driver 20 liters of gasoline [to transport the girl to the district hospital for treatment] and the parents were even grateful for that. I heard the teacher [name withheld] say to the girls’ father, ‘Don’t even think of asking the farmer for any money; don’t put us in an awkward situation.’”

The second and third cases of serious injury occurred as a result of falls from the tractor wagons transporting children to and from the fields. In one case this caused a compound fracture of the arm; that family received no compensation for the boy’s injury.<sup>55</sup> In another case, a young girl broke her leg, as reported by a friend of the family:

The poor father had to sell his property to bring her to Tashkent several times for treatment, but it was all in vain, and his daughter still has difficulty walking...The girl’s father went to the local prosecutor’s office [to try to gain compensation], but there they tried to make out that the girl herself was guilty—‘why didn’t she observe the safety procedures?’, they said. Therefore, supposedly they are going to prosecute the girl herself. The poor father has really lost his mind since then. He has stopped going around with any petitions, since he’s afraid that he’ll lose all of his money to the investigators. They did the same thing with the tractor driver [name withheld]. They fleeced him like a sheep too. Those prosecutors should be damned.<sup>56</sup>

In other cases of illness or injury, teachers reportedly told students that since the children obtained them not in the service of anyone’s private interests (such as by working in a farmer’s private garden plot) but working at the behest of the state, then no one is responsible and they should not expect any assistance.

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<sup>54</sup> Samarkand pupil 3. Overall, respondents report little spraying of pesticides or defoliant in the period of the harvest, though several complained of stinging and burning of eyes and skin, and headaches, presumed caused by chemical residues on the cotton plants. Only one respondent witnessed spraying, of an unknown chemical, while in the fields (Khorezm B, pupil 5); one Samarkand farmer reported using a defoliant as his cotton ripened late (Samarkand farmer 2). While hepatitis is a viral illness which, in cases of type A and E, are contracted usually via contaminated food or water, some researchers have tied viral hepatitis prevalence to decreased immunity, and specifically to harmful effects on the liver brought about by pesticide exposure. El Safty, A., Amr, M, Faculty of Medicine. Cairo University. Egypt, Cairo, Cairo, Egypt, “Effects of pesticides on human cell mediated immunity and their relations with viral hepatitis,” Paper presented at the 25<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry, June 2004. Abstract accessed July 15, 2008, <http://abstracts.co.allenpress.com/pweb/setac2004/document/42198>.

<sup>55</sup> Bukhara parent 5.

<sup>56</sup> Bukhara parent 1.

## *Consequences*

Evidence shows that children undergo great risks to their health and well-being during their forced labor on the cotton harvest. Beyond injuries resulting from accidents, hazards for health include gastroenteritis and other illnesses, including hepatitis, contracted from contaminated food and water.<sup>57</sup> There was little or no medical assistance provided for these illnesses, other than by teachers who sometimes distributed over-the-counter anti-diarrheal medications.<sup>58</sup>

By far the most extensive, universal consequence of the forced mobilization of children is the damage done to rural children's education. In order to make up for time lost, respondents indicated, children go to school during planned holiday periods, but often that is not enough to compensate for the harvest period. One teacher summarized thus: "The curriculum is planned for nine months, but each year the school year is cut by two or more months. At the beginning of the school year the children are just waiting for cotton picking to begin and so don't study seriously. Then after the cotton harvest is over it is difficult to turn their minds toward study. Cutting back on school holidays doesn't help. And you must take into consideration that the overall quality of instruction is not high."<sup>59</sup> Other teachers, parents and students echoed the complaint that the lapsed lessons are never learned properly and that overall the quality of education suffers badly. "However many additional lessons we schedule, however much we try to make up for lost time, nonetheless the mass mobilization for cotton has a negative effect on our pupils' level of knowledge."<sup>60</sup> One eighth-grade pupil concurred that "after school resumes, the teachers have to cram a lot into one class period. It's hard to remember all the material. I'm a good student, but nonetheless I have trouble learning all the lessons."<sup>61</sup>

Coupled with schoolchildren's forced participation in spring fieldwork, and periodic school closures in the winter months due to lack of heating, the discriminatory effect against rural children

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<sup>57</sup> There were five publicly reported fatalities of children during the 2008 cotton harvest. Though none of the respondents of this survey had first-hand knowledge of any deaths, one pupil had heard of a death in a neighboring district (Samarkand pupil 5).

<sup>58</sup> Khorezm B, pupil 4.

<sup>59</sup> Khorezm B, teacher 5.

<sup>60</sup> Bukhara teacher 3.

<sup>61</sup> Khorezm B, pupil 3.

erects a much higher barrier to their entry into higher education than for their urban counterparts. Schoolchildren interviewed for this survey expressed frustration at the barriers to achieving their ambitions created by their forced work picking cotton. “I don’t want to pick cotton. In the future I want to become a doctor. First I want to complete the [location withheld] medical college [high school] and then go on to Tashkent Medical Institute. I hate picking cotton!”<sup>62</sup> Parents noted the increasing difficulty of gaining admission to higher education, and even teachers admitted that their students are generally admitted “only for money.”<sup>63</sup>

### *Social attitudes*

Not one of the fifty-two teachers, parents or students interviewed for this report indicated that they would elect to have schoolchildren in the fields harvesting cotton if given the choice. Every one of them, as well as the twenty farmers interviewed, stated that they disapproved of the practice of taking children out of school to pick cotton. Two parents, under extreme economic duress were grateful to have the small financial benefit their children earned, but still stated that children’s work should be only during after school hours.

Even farmers who ostensibly benefited from the arrangement regretted the cost to the children. “They are children, of course they should be in school, not working in the fields!” exclaimed one. “But what can you do if it is the government itself chasing them out there?”<sup>64</sup> Farmers interviewed also noted that if they had a choice, they would prefer to engage adult labor, but that they too were victims of a system in which the state underpays them for the cotton they grow, and then forces them to accept coerced labor.<sup>65</sup> For purely pragmatic reasons, according to many of the farmers interviewed, children are not advantageous workers (cost considerations aside): they often tire easily, and are not particularly focused on the quality of their picking, leaving half bolls or other portions of fiber on the plants. There

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<sup>62</sup> Samarkand pupil 2.

<sup>63</sup> Khorezm A, teacher 3.

<sup>64</sup> Bukhara farmer 2.

<sup>65</sup> Farmers reported that the prevailing market wage for cotton pickers in neighboring countries is equal to 200,000 Uzbek sum per ton of raw fiber (or 139 US dollars, versus the 60,000 sum, or roughly 42 USD officially paid to Uzbekistan’s laborers per ton picked). Farmers themselves reported receiving 495,000 Uzbek sum per ton for the fiber itself (345 US dollars). At the current rates of remuneration for their crop, several farmers interviewed ended the season in debt to the state, and most reported barely breaking even.

are even cases when farmers try to decline children's labor in their fields, only to be instructed by the village council to use them.<sup>66</sup> "The farmer has to use the laborers the state tells him to: if they tell him schoolchildren, then it's schoolchildren, if they tell him college students, then it's college students. But I already mentioned that I didn't want to use schoolchildren," explained a farmer from Samarkand.<sup>67</sup>

Though at times teachers and parents expressed rancor toward farmers, saying that it would be better if those who grew the cotton were responsible for harvesting it, in general many of them, and even the schoolchildren interviewed, understood the impossible economic situation and political pressures farmers faced.<sup>68</sup> Respondents recognized the paradox created by the many unemployed workers migrating to neighboring Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or even Tajikistan to pick cotton, while the government forces schoolchildren to bring in the harvest at home in Uzbekistan. "There are 3-400 unemployed young men in our district but you can't force even one of them out to pick cotton. The village council has tried, and even the police. In my opinion, if you want them out in the fields, you have to pay them the same rate as they would earn in Kazakhstan," opined one teacher.<sup>69</sup> Schoolchildren and parents recognized that the state simply finds it easier to exploit them than to risk the rancor of the legions of unemployed young men. "We live subject to their orders just as our children live subject to

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<sup>66</sup> In the middle of the 2008 harvest season, the government issued a decree commanding local authorities to repossess former collective farm land now cultivated under leasehold in plots of 30 hectares or fewer (60 hectares on some regions). The policy aims to redistribute the land in larger parcels and therefore to "optimize" farming practices. In practice this meant that local *khokims*, who enjoyed discretion in their decisions to confiscate and to whom to re-allocate the land, were able to promote allies and punish others, while abrogating previous long-term leasehold agreements. There were reports that some farmers planned to challenge the confiscations in court, but no more recent reports that any cases have been heard. See "***Uzbekistan: Farmers are Against Land Reforms,***" [www.fergana.ru](http://www.fergana.ru), 12.11.2008, <http://enews.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=2476> ) At the time these interviews were taken, in November and December 2008, some farmers had been informed already that their land would be entered into the district "reserve fund," and others were awaiting *khokims'* dispensation. Decisions did not seem to depend on whether or not farmers had met their assigned cotton quotas, although farmers assumed that their chances of losing their land increased if the targets were not met. In this atmosphere, when the state's power over farmers' economic survival was laid so bare, the thought of challenging state officials on the matter of children's forced labor in their fields seemed unrealistic to many respondents. (Bukhara farmer 1.)

<sup>67</sup> Samarkand farmer 1.

<sup>68</sup> Bukhara parent 4

<sup>69</sup> Bukhara teacher 5.

their orders. It's not every adult that you can just order around. Children are easy to force. You don't have to feed them or treat them well. They're very profitable workers. "<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusion

Although Uzbekistan has recently signed two ILO conventions against forced and child labor, Nos. 182 and 138, and issued a new decree ostensibly prohibiting the practice, information from around the country showed that the government continued to rely on the state-orchestrated mass mobilization of children to bring in the 2008 cotton harvest. The measures taken since July 2008 appear to be largely cosmetic, and intended to ease international pressure and a growing boycott movement through the promulgation of paper measures. There is no indication that these measures have been implemented and they should not be taken as indicators of meaningful steps forward.

To date, the Government of Uzbekistan publicly denies that the mass mobilization of children is an official policy, claiming that children volunteer out of loyalty to family or their community. There has been no public acknowledgement, nor any acknowledgement in the National Action Plan, that the state plays a role in compelling children to labor. Blame is apportioned to irresponsible parents. However, as the interviews in this report show, societal attitudes are not a relevant factor in this case. Interviewees overwhelmingly recognized the inappropriateness of sending schoolchildren to harvest cotton, and their concern with state policies that interfered with children's health, welfare and education. Given the strictly-imposed cotton quotas, and the threat of sanctions or penalties on non-compliant families and even on farmers, in reality there is no alternative but that children leave school and join brigades to participate in the cotton harvest.

Uzbekistan, with its massive unemployment, was and is entirely able to eliminate forced child labor. The country already has several laws on the books that would, if respected, ban children's forced labor on the cotton harvest. The practice clearly violates Uzbekistan's own longstanding statutes on the rights of children, and the labor code including its provisions on the minimum age and conditions of children's work. Yet despite these laws, over the past decade, the government has only intensified its

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<sup>70</sup> Khorezm B parent 1.

reliance on forced child labor to bring in the cotton harvest, due to a number of economic and political factors. Among these are the persistence of elements of a command economy in the sector, and constraints on a free labor market.

The government of Uzbekistan, as demonstrated by the delay last year (2008) in sending out schoolchildren, can put a stop to this mobilization. The order to these districts not to deploy schoolchildren was strictly observed, just as the opposite order, issued just three weeks later, was immediately carried out. Manpower shortage is not the factor driving the exploitation of children; rather, it is the system of mandatory state orders for cotton crops and state control over the purchase price for cotton, leaving no margin to pay the masses of unemployed Uzbekistani workers market wages. Moreover, the authoritarian habit of command and control persists even when the economic rationale is slim, given that schools were closed and children were in the fields in some areas *when there was already no cotton left to pick*.

Meaningful steps toward ending the problem are well within the reach of the Government of Uzbekistan; the principal obstacle to taking such steps is political will. Under its commitments to the recently-signed ILO Convention No. 182, the Uzbek government is obligated to provide the ILO a list of sectors where worst forms of child labor may be found. Public acknowledgement of the problem through public identification of cotton as a target sector is one important precursor to further action.

Subsequent to identifying worst forms of child labor in cotton, a careful assessment of problem undertaken in cooperation with ILO and would doubtless reveal and confirm the root causes of the problem identified in this report. The next significant hurdle will be overcoming the political motivations for continuation of forced child labor. In the event the Government of Uzbekistan is genuinely willing to address drivers of child labor, a new National Action Plan should be drafted that addresses these root causes, including a plan to ensure that adequate adult wage labor is available during the cotton harvest season. As an important corollary to the plan itself, the Government of Uzbekistan must also allow independent journalists and activists to have unfettered access to observe conditions during the fall 2009 harvest as a means to ensure independent external verification that meaningful action has been taken to remove both children and forced adult labor from the cotton fields.

## **Appendix:**

### *Questionnaire for interviewing schoolchildren*

1. On what dates were children sent out to pick cotton?
2. When were they promised to return? When did they return?
3. Which grades were sent out?
4. Whom, and how many pupils were excused from this work?
5. Were there any labor contracts signed with you or your parents?
6. What would the school administration do if there were children who refused to go to the fields, or parents who refused to send them?
7. How far away from the school were the fields where the children worked?
8. Did they remain in the fields or come home each night?
9. Who supervised their work; who was responsible for keeping order?
10. How long was their work day? When did it start and end?
11. Did they have any days off?
12. Is there any norm the pupils must meet, and if so, what is it? Does it vary from the beginning to the middle to the end of the season?
13. [for schoolchildren] How much cotton did you personally pick per day? At the start of the season? In the middle? At the end?
14. How much cotton did the majority of students from your school pick?
15. What actions did the school administration or farmers take toward those who didn't meet their norms?
16. Were you paid? If so, how much per kilogram? Was any portion of your pay withheld, and if so, for what reason?
17. Were there meals provided, and if so, what were you fed morning, noon and night?
18. Who bore the cost of meals provided? Were funds deducted from pupils' pay, and if so, how much?
19. How was drinking water provided? What was the source of your drinking water during fieldwork or during your stay in the fields? Was it boiled?
20. Were children exposed to any pesticides, defoliants, other agricultural chemicals or chemical fertilizers in the fields? If so, then which ones? Do you know anything about how they were used?

21. Were there any accidents among the children from your school, poisoning or other illnesses during the harvest work? If so, then what kind of medical assistance was provided? Was there any financial compensation provided?
22. What is your own view about this work? Do you like working here? What would you prefer to do at this time of year: work in the fields, or study in school?
23. Do the teachers have to cut down the curriculum in order to accommodate field work? If so, then how?
24. Name, age [school and grade], date time and place of interview

*Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers, No 207*

**“On measures to implement to Conventions ratified by Uzbekistan On the Minimum Age of Employment and the Convention on the Prohibition and Immediate Measures on the Elimination of the Worst forms of Child Labor”**

The Cabinet of Ministers, in connection with the Republic of Uzbekistan’s ratification of the Convention on the Minimum age for Employment and the Convention on the Prohibition and Immediate Measures on the Elimination of the Worst forms of Child Labor, in order to coordinate the activities of Ministries and ministerial-level agencies, as well as local government bodies, and to strengthen their cooperation with international and public organizations regarding child labor, resolves the following:

1. To approve the national plan of action on the implementation of the Convention on the Minimum Age for Employment and the Convention on the Prohibition and Immediate Measures on the Elimination of the Worst forms of Child Labor (hereinafter—the National Action Plan), in accordance with the appended [document].
2. To entrust the Ministry of Labor and Social Defense of the Population with the coordination of ministerial, agency and public organizational activities to fulfill the obligations that stem from the aforementioned Conventions as well as from the National Action Plan
3. The Ministry of Labor and Social Defense of the Population, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan together with the cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, the provincial *khokimiats* and that of Tashkent city will oversee the enforcement of the prohibition on forced child labor and adherence to the established legal norms on the labor conditions for minors by all enterprises, organizations and physical persons. [The Cabinet of Ministers] recommends to the General Prosecutor’s office of the Republic of Uzbekistan to strengthen its oversight of adherence to all provisions of the Convention on the Minimum Age of Employment and the Convention on the Prohibition and Immediate Measures on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor.
4. The Cabinet of Ministers Commission on Minors’ Affairs will regularly review the implementation of the National Action Plan.
5. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan will inform interested international organizations of the National Action Plan.
6. First Deputy Prime Minister R. S. Azimov will be responsible for monitoring the implementation of this decree.

*Prime Minister of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziov*

*September 12, 2008*