

Only a boycott of Uzbek cotton can convince the Karimov regime to stop forced child labor in this country!

An open letter from Uzbek civic activists to:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The European Union• The United States Administration• Companies importing cotton, textiles, and cotton products• International Executive Committee of Cotton, Textiles, and Cotton Products; Bremen Cotton Exchange; Gdynia Cotton Association• World Bank• Asian Development Bank	cc: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• United Nations Human Rights Council• International Labor Organization• UNICEF• European Bank for Reconstruction and Development• The Government and Citizens of Uzbekistan• Those concerned about human rights in Uzbekistan
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Summary:

- *Despite ratifying International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions, **Uzbekistan continues to use forced child labor.***
- *Uzbekistan does not reinvest the proceeds from its cotton exports into cotton producers and the rural areas where it is grown, but siphons it into the hands of a small group of the country's ruling elites.*
- ***World Bank and Asian Development Bank loans to Uzbekistan's agricultural sector have not led to genuine reform.** Uzbekistan's continued reliance upon a command economy paves the way for loans to go into the hands of the ruling elite. Activists are calling for international financial instruments to lend to the Uzbek agro-sector only on a conditional basis, to encourage the reforms that would free Uzbek farmers from the tyranny of a corrupt regime.*
- ***Activists are calling for a boycott of Uzbek cotton.** They call upon companies importing cotton, in particular the Dubai Multi Commodities Centre, as well as retailers, to adhere to the principles of corporate social responsibility*
- *The international community should not take at face value mere spoken or written commitments made by Uzbekistan, but should demand actions demonstrating a complete end to the practice of forced child labor that can be **verified via an independent monitoring during the cotton season.***
- *Activists call on the U.S. government and the EU to take steps to **prevent their markets from being penetrated by products bearing traces of forced child labor.***

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This appeal is released to coincide with the **World Day Against Child Labor**, June 12, 2009. This day is particularly important for Uzbekistan as the use of forced child labor is one of the most acute issues of human rights in Uzbekistan.

According to various independent assessments, between **1.6 to 2.4 million children** from the ages of 10 to 15, as well as tens of thousands of students and civil servants on the direct order of local authorities spend two months every autumn in the cotton fields, virtually turning the entire country into a giant labor camp.

During the harvest period, the state closes schools and children, under the supervision of their teachers, pick cotton full-time without even a day off in fields treated by agrochemicals. Neither these children nor their parents are consulted as to whether they want to work in the fields. The children's failure to meet daily quota for picking cotton can lead to their public denouncement or even physical abuse, and their families can be deprived of their access to public services and utilities.

We are certain that Uzbekistan's child labor is **not an initiative of families or some single local bureaucrats**, as the government may claim, but is organized by local authorities at the direct, though not written, **instructions of the central government**. Despite the pervasiveness of child labor, the authorities publically and routinely deny the existence of the massive exploitation of children, as well as their own involvement in it. The government refers to their adoption of laws and conventions prohibiting the use of child labor. However, for those who are familiar with the daily realities of Uzbekistan, this argument is unconvincing and even ridiculous.

We claim that the Constitution and laws of Uzbekistan are not the guiding principles of the current government. There is a big gap in Uzbekistan between what's written in the books, and another, what goes on in practice.

We, the citizens of Uzbekistan, are witnesses to this double standard and the shameful practices that hark back to Stalin's era. For some time, this issue was relatively low-profile internationally, but that has begun to change in the last two years.

In December 2008, at a session of the UN Human Rights Council, over 10 states raised the issue of child labor in Uzbekistan, as it contravenes Uzbekistan's international human rights commitments.

In response to this criticism, Uzbekistan ratified two International Labor Organization conventions: **Concerning the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment** (№ 138) and concerning the **Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor** (№ 182). In September 2008, the government adopted a decree on the implementation of its new obligations. But the question remains: **did anything change in practice?**

With a wealth of evidence and documentation on hand, we argue that since the signing of these documents, nothing changed: only weeks following the decree's adoption, schools were

closed and **children, once again, as in the previous year, were forcibly rounded up and sent to the cotton fields.** In addition, other citizens, such as students, civil servants, housewives, and even the elderly, were forced to participate in the cotton harvest with even greater intensity.

As an independent state for the past 20 years, Uzbekistan's government has been a signatory to over 60 major human rights instruments, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Elimination of All Forms of Forced or Compulsory Labor of (№ 29 and № 105), and others. However, we attest to the fact that Uzbekistan's commitments to all previously signed and ratified obligations are empty promises with no bearings on actual practices.

We are surprised and outraged that some officials in the West consider the signing of ILO conventions as "progress." We see this as yet another example of empty promises. The 20 year-old post-Soviet history of the authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan has shown numerous examples of the government willing to sign international conventions as smokescreen to mislead the international community. One must be naïve or deliberately casting a blind eye to believe that the current Karimov regime takes its obligations respecting human rights seriously.

No real progress can be declared until an independent investigation has found evidence that Uzbekistan indeed has ended the practice of forced labor.

Based on our observations and numerous, but futile attempts to persuade the Karimov regime to respect human rights, we have concluded that the ruling regime in Uzbekistan will only yield to real pressure from the international community. With regard to forced child labor, to date, **there is no more effective means to persuade the Uzbek regime to end the practice than through threats to boycott Uzbek cotton.** In November 2007 and January 2008, a number of Uzbek activists called for a boycott. Today, we reaffirm our commitment to this call.

We must look at the root of the problem. The **cotton sector needs comprehensive reform.** Farmers, replacing collective farms, are still deprived of their freedoms and rights to choose what they grow on their land and how to use their products. In autumn 2008, the government, under the pretext of the "optimization" of land resources allocated to farmers, in fact, began a **massive expropriation of the farmers' land** resulting in about half of all farmers dispossessed of their lands and without any kind of compensation for the costs of the harvest that year. This recalls Stalin's violent collectivization campaign of the 1930s -- and we know of the tragic consequences of that historical episode. It is astounding that the government of Uzbekistan is following this same path and yet no one is stopping it from doing so.

If the government genuinely intended to make changes, it would reform the cotton sector by granting farmers the right to decide for themselves what to grow on their land, the right to sell it themselves as well as determine pricing on the base of supply and demand. However, there is no indication that the Karimov regime intends to reform the cotton sector. Therefore, any promises to end child labor ring hollow; but **some officials in the West give too much credibility to the Uzbek government's promises.**

In this regard, we find it regrettable that the **World Bank** and **Asian Development Bank** continue to finance Uzbekistan's agricultural sector. In 2001, the World Bank provided \$36 million in loans to support reform in the agricultural sector. Despite the fact that the goals of

the loan were not achieved (the cotton sector did not undergo reform and continues to be dominated by command economy), in February 2009, the World Bank, counter to any logic, opened up another credit line to Uzbekistan in the amount of \$69.96 million. Unfortunately, none of these cash injections have led to any reform in the agricultural sector, and have simply channeled resources into the hands of the country's ruling elites.

Within the context of a command economy, no other outcomes are possible. **All profits from the cotton sector are concentrated in the hands of the president, his family, and those few close to him.** According to our data, the profits of the Uzbekistan's state budget do not reflect income from cotton exports either in the form of taxes or direct income from exports. Export revenues simply do not reach the state budget and therefore do not benefit the national economy or Uzbek society. In Uzbekistan, there is a sophisticated system to drain resources from the country's rural areas. Because of price disparities, as the state determines an artificially low price for cotton and farmers purchase their production inputs at market and often monopoly prices; farmers, as a rule, lose out in the cotton sector. Farmers, like children, are also victims of this deeply flawed system.

At the same time, the rural schools supplying cheap labor are themselves in poor condition, lacking heat in the winter and generally underfunded. School administrations deduct money from children's compensation from gathering cotton for school renovation. Due to the mass closure of schools during the cotton season, the quality of education drops every year. Thus, subjecting children to exploitation and depriving them of education, Uzbekistan's regime robs the lives and futures of millions of Uzbek children, giving instead lives of near-slavery and futures with fewer options other than the downtrodden life of labor migrants abroad.

We urge the World Bank and Asian Development Bank to reconsider their policies in respect to Uzbekistan and to promote *real* reform in the agricultural sector of the country.

We encourage trading companies importing cotton, to disclose to the public which part of their stock they are buying from Uzbekistan and to set a moratorium on further purchases from that country. We bring to the international community's attention the cotton exchange in Dubai, where cotton operations are non-transparent and conceal the traces of Uzbek cotton. As the **Dubai Multi Commodities Centre (DMCC) has decided to purchase 200 thousand tons of Uzbek cotton**, we would like to make retailers in the West aware of this fact, and to urge them to avoid purchasing cotton products that have passed through this exchange.

We urge the U.S. Government and European Union to take effective measures to **prevent cotton products bearing traces of forced child labor from gaining access to their markets.** Europe and the United States abolished slavery in their countries, but by purchasing Uzbek cotton products, they are encouraging slavery in this Central Asian country. That Uzbek cotton continues to benefit from the General System of Preferences (GSP) that reduces import tax duties for Uzbek cotton and textile, can also be viewed as an endorsement of slavery.

Some warn that the boycott of Uzbek cotton may actually harm the interests of ordinary farmers. This is the kind of logic that would justify the freeing criminals since imprisoning them would deprive their families of breadwinners. **The boycott intends to pressure the Uzbek regime to change its policy toward the cotton industry, which would serve the real interests of farmers, schoolchildren and society.**

We hope that the international day against child labor will not be honored through empty and abstract declarations and formal events, but will be an occasion for serious discussion and consideration of tangible measures to prevent forced child labor in Uzbekistan.

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