



THE COVER-UP

WHITEWASHING UZBEKISTAN'S WHITE GOLD

Persecution of Independent Monitors to Cover Up Mass Forced Labor in the Cotton Sector

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CORRUPTION AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY



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Although the ILO report makes little mention of corruption, it is an inseparable feature of the forced labor system and in 2015 took its toll on citizens. Corruption in the harvest takes many forms. At the highest levels, cotton revenues go into a fund controlled by top officials and not publicly accounted for. Many respondents told us that they believe the government deploys public workers, mahalla residents, and students to pick cotton rather than using day laborers or unemployed people eager for work simply to make a bigger profit.

At lower levels, officials at every level exploited the vulnerability of their constituents for personal gain. Our monitors documented several instances where local officials continued to send workers to the fields and imposed daily picking quotas after the district harvest quota had been met and there was little cotton to pick in what appeared to be personal enrichment schemes. Some workers paid to avoid picking; those that picked paid “fines” for failure to meet unrealistic quotas. A nurse from Andijan who was in the fields with half the staff of the hospital late in the harvest reported that she could manage to pick only three kilos a day even though she was in the fields from early morning until late evening. The local officials imposed a daily quota of 10 kilos. She was forced to buy cotton to make up the shortfall or pay the officials directly.¹ Some workers, especially medical and education workers, told our monitors that the last ten days of the harvest provide a significant opportunity for local officials to extort money from workers.²



Over the last ten years, in an international corruption ranking, Uzbekistan annually landed among the top ten of the most corrupt countries in the world. (Caricature by the Uzbek Artist Elsevar, available at: <http://www.eltuz.com/en/?p=305>)

Wage Violations and Losses to Workers from Payments and Costs

People who picked cotton in 2015 were responsible for significant expenses associated with this work, undermining its potential value as a reasonable source of supplemental income. These payments amounted to direct subsidies to the cotton industry by the people of Uzbekistan, many of whom live in poverty. People forced to pick cotton had to pay for food, bathing facilities, special clothing, and in some cases transportation, laundry and housing.

¹ Andijan monitor's report. November 2015.

² Andijan monitor's report. November 2015.

Numerous people told us that although they were promised money for picking cotton, due to mandatory withholdings for food and housing, fines for failing to meet the quota or for wet or dirty cotton, or other reasons, they did not receive the promised payments. Many received very little, and some people even went into debt. In 2015 workers were generally promised 239 soum/kilogram (approximately \$.03 USD). A lack of transparency around payments, fines, and costs combined with a lack of empowerment of workers to complain and mechanisms to seek redress plague the mobilization system.

A teacher told us, “We were supposed to get 239 soum for every kilo. At first they calculated every kilo. Then they got mixed up. By our own count, they never gave us the full amount. Every time it came out to be 5 – 10 kilos less. When we asked, they would tell us they would give it to us next time. But every time it was the same.”³

A third-year student who picked cotton with her college said that she would be willing to pick for decent compensation, but that officials lied to students, promising incentives that did not materialize, such as valuable prizes for everyone who exceeded the 60 kilo per day quota, and paying lower wages than promised. The student hoped to earn enough to purchase a mobile phone.

I threw myself into picking cotton. Every day I picked more than 60 kilos. But then... they forgot about the prizes. They not only didn't give us an iPhone, but not even a cheap mobile. And we had never really believed that the prize would really be an iPhone, but who doesn't need even the cheapest mobile phone if it's a prize, in addition to salary? But they even tried to forget about the money that we earned legally for the cotton we picked. I made a point of writing down how much I picked each day. Sixty kilos multiplied by 10 days multiplied by 260 soum is 150,000 soum (approximately \$25 USD). I demanded my 150,000 soum for the first 10 days' work from the teacher who accompanied us to the fields each day. But they explained to me that the cotton collection headquarters [where cotton is deposited] withholds 10% from the physical kilograms, which are called 'conditional kilograms,' and we are only paid for 'conditional kilograms' [this is ostensibly because cotton can contain moisture or debris that contribute to the weight]. And from every 260 soum they withhold 30 soum for income tax. So it works out that from the 600 kilograms [that I picked in 10 days], take away 60, 540 kilos are left; from 260 take away 30, 230 soum are left. So 540 kilos multiplied by 230 soum is 124,000 soum (approximately \$20.60 USD). But they didn't even give me that. They gave me only 120,000 (approximately \$20 USD). I continued to fight. I demanded the rest. I demanded the promised bonus. I wanted to use my earnings to buy a good mobile phone. Now, classes have started again and they are requiring us to pay for scrap metal – 50 kilos. Either we bring in 50 kilos or we pay 25,000



This poster promises cotton pickers 239,20 Soum (approximately 0.03 USD) per kilogram of cotton. For a daily amount of cotton (around 50 kilogram), a picker would receive the equivalent of approximately 1,30 USD.



3 Uzbek-German Forum interview with a schoolteacher, Andijan region, November 8, 2015.

*soum (approximately \$4 USD). And another 10,000 (approximately \$1.60 USD) for magazines and newspapers.*⁴

In the end, the student, who missed two months of classes, earned 220,000 soum (approximately \$36.60 USD), with which she purchased a winter coat and boots.

A student from Jizzakh who picked cotton for 40 days said, "I received about 20,000 soum (approximately \$3.33 USD) for the entire season. But they had withheld for food. So since we were at the fields for 40 days and they withheld 4000 soum (approximately \$.67 USD) per day for food, so for food alone they withheld 160,000 soum (approximately 26.67 USD). That means if you add what I took home I really earned 180,000 soum (approximately \$30). And the 20,000 I did receive they took for newspaper and magazine subscriptions."⁵

Another student reported that by occasionally exceeding the norm and selling the extra cotton to other students for slightly more than the established rate of 230 soum/kilogram, she earned 450,000 soum (approximately \$75 USD) in six weeks of 10-hour days with no days. She noted that the amount was just enough to cover her expenses. "I earned about 450,000 soum (approximately \$75 USD). I covered my expenses. Every day we had to buy food... every three days we went to bathe. There were also other expenses. The money I earned picking cotton was enough to cover what it cost to pick and that's all."⁶

A doctor told us that although she earned 75,000 soum (\$12.50 USD) during the season, leaving home at 7:00 a.m. every day, and returning at 6:30 or 7:00 every evening, she ended up paying 200,000 soum (\$33) for clothing, food, and transportation. She also saw patients at her home in the evenings for no payment, because they could not get treatment during the day, when so many medical staff were in the fields. In addition, her daughter was forced to spend a month and a half picking cotton with her university, and the family spent more than 2 million soum (\$330 USD) to buy food for her and her teachers, in part to ensure better treatment for their daughter.⁷

Generally, workers reported that living conditions at the fields were extremely poor, with serious problems regarding access to sufficient potable water, hygiene, and overcrowding. Although a few workers expressed satisfaction with food supplied by farmers, most said that the food was



On the cotton fields, people got water from containers.

⁴ Uzbek-German Forum interview with third-year student, Jizzakh region, November 3, 2015.

⁵ Uzbek-German Forum interview with third-year student, Jizzakh region, November 8, 2015.

⁶ Uzbek-German Forum interview with college student, Syrdarya region, November 7, 2015.

⁷ Uzbek-German Forum interview with doctor, Andijan region, November 13, 2015.

insufficient, poor quality, monotonous, and contained few fruits or vegetables. Most workers reported that they brought food from home or purchased food to supplement whatever they received from farmers.

As in previous years, in 2015 many pickers reported that automatic deductions were taken from their wages ostensibly to pay for food. In no cases were workers provided a transparent accounting for how money deducted from their salaries was spent or given an option to forego the deduction and provide their own food. A teacher from Jizzakh said, “the entire amount we were paid went to our food costs. The pickers received next to nothing.”⁸

In the morning we eat breakfast from whatever we can find. They only give us tea. We have lunch at the field. The farmer prepares food. He gives us bread – everyone gets two rolls. That’s all. In the evening we again eat whatever we can find or what people have been brought from home. This year the conditions were very bad. We thought that the 5,000 – 10,000 soum (approximately \$.83 – 1.67 USD) withheld every 5 or 10 days goes to food. We asked the farmer and he said no, that he buys food for us at his own expense.⁹

A student from Karakalpakstan said, “the price for one kilo from start to finish was 230 soum. But they didn’t pay students any money, telling them it was all spent on food. Those who didn’t pick much went into debt for the food.”¹⁰

8 Uzbek-German Forum interview with college teacher, Jizzakh region, November 9, 2015.

9 Uzbek-German Forum interview with secondary school teacher, Andijan region, November 8, 2015.

10 Uzbek-German Forum interview with college student, Karakalpakstan, November 3, 2015.



In some regions, tents were set up for accomodating cotton pickers. This picture was taken from an anonymous facebook user.