



# THE COVER-UP

## WHITEWASHING UZBEKISTAN'S WHITE GOLD

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

*Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights e.V., March 2016*

## FORCED MOBILIZATION OF LABOR IN 2015



# FORCED MOBILIZATION OF LABOR IN 2015

In 2015 the government forcibly mobilized more than a million people including students, public sector employees, and employees of private business to harvest cotton.<sup>1</sup> It sent teachers and medical workers to the fields in droves, despite stated policy commitments not to recruit from the health and education sectors.<sup>2</sup>

Estimating the number of Uzbek citizens forced to work in the cotton sector is hampered by the lack of reliable economic data from Uzbekistan and the Uzbek government's active interference with attempts to gather data on practices in the cotton sector. Yet select figures are available and enable the approximation of the labor demand for the cotton harvest.

Official news sources cited the crop yield as over 3.35 million tons and the harvest lasted for two months.<sup>3</sup> While quotas varied by region and timing during the harvest, average daily norms across

- 1 International treaties to which Uzbekistan is a party, absolutely prohibits forced labor, defined by ILO convention No. 29 as "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself [or herself] voluntarily." ILO Convention No. 29 concerning Forced or Compulsory Labor (Forced Labor Convention), adopted June 28, 1930, 39 U.N.T.S. 55, entered into force May 1, 1932. For a, overview of Uzbek and international standards regulating forced child labor and forced labor, see Legal Standards, Appendix.
- 2 ILO Third Party Monitoring report, Policy Commitments, p. 84. For past research on forced labor in Uzbekistan, see the Uzbek-German Forum reports on forced labor in planting and weeding cotton, and on the annual cotton harvests, available at: <http://uzbekgermanforum.org/category/ugf-reports/>. The government uses forced labor in other sectors of the economy in Uzbekistan as well. Many respondents told the Uzbek-German Forum that they are regularly required to do forced, unpaid labor such as cleaning the streets, planting flowers, or guarding construction sites. The Uzbek-German Forum has also found systematic forced labor in silk production in Uzbekistan see: "Silk Loop for Uzbek Farmers," Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights, September 12, 2015, available at: <http://uzbekgermanforum.org/report-silk-loop-for-uzbek-farmers/>.
- 3 "Хлопкоробы Узбекистана собрали в 2015 году более 3 миллионов 350 тысяч тонн хлопка [Cotton pickers in Uzbekistan harvested more than 3.35 million tons of cotton in 2015], STV, October 10, 2015, available at: <http://stv.uz/news/economic/3147-hlopkoroby-uzbekistana-sobrali-v-2015-godu-bolee-3-millionov-350-tysyach-tonn-hloпка.html>.



Public sector employees in the Tashkent region on their way to the cotton fields.

the harvest were in the range of 25 – 50 kilograms per person. This means that 67 – 134 million person days were required to harvest the crop. While a small amount was mechanically harvested, and some was picked by truly voluntary labor, the vast majority of the days in the cotton fields were put in by forced laborers or day laborers people paid out of their own pockets to avoid doing the work themselves. Conservatively estimating to account for the unknowns, the government forced more than a million people to pick cotton in 2015.



Drivers are being instructed by traffic police officers to safely bring students to the cotton fields (September 2015).

## Mandatory Participation in the Harvest

A key indicator that participation in the cotton harvest was mandatory and not voluntary was the fact that people had to ensure that they or someone else picked cotton in their names. They were forced to go to the fields by their institutions – schools, universities, hospitals, or mahallas – so that the institutions could report to higher authorities that they had fulfilled their mobilization requirements. School, college, and university administrations, public health officials, mahalla committee chairpersons, and other heads of public sector institutions were responsible not for recruitment of any workers or even providing a certain number of workers, but for ensuring the mandatory participation of their students, employees, or residents. Even where someone hired a replacement worker to pick, the replacement worker picked – and received any payment – in the name of the individual who hired him or her. In the experience of some, administrators’ mobilization orders were disconnected from the production target. A teacher from Jizzakh said, “the most important thing was that we sent 15 people every day. The most important thing was how many teachers we sent, not how much we picked.”<sup>4</sup>

Numerous interviewees told us that the key was to ensure that someone report to the fields in their name. It did not matter if they went themselves or sent a relative in their place or hired a replacement worker, as long as the cotton was picked in their name. For example a teacher from the Andijan region told us:

*For the school administration, it’s enough that you went to the fields. There the farmer or his deputy responsible for organization watches what you do. If you don’t pick much you won’t get paid for the work. For the school it’s enough that you go to the fields, it isn’t important that someone goes in your place as long as your name is in the list of those who have gone to the harvest.”<sup>5</sup>*

It is unclear why it would be necessary for these public officials to show participation of particular individuals for a truly voluntary activity, underscoring the mandatory nature of mobilization. Indeed, the ILO observed that a student had a letter from his university officials releasing him from cotton work and noted that such a release would not be necessary for a voluntary activity.<sup>6</sup>

4 Uzbek-German Forum interview with a schoolteacher, Jizzakh region, November 8, 2015.

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

6 ILO Third Party Monitoring Report, 7 (45), p. 14.



Local officials responsible for recruitment of labor issued labor quotas to businesses and public sector institutions such as schools, medical facilities, and government offices. In all regions we monitored in 2015, people from different sectors consistently reported that up to 40% employees, and in a few cases more, were sent to the fields for shifts of 15 – 40 days. The remaining employees worked overtime or assumed additional responsibilities to cover for their colleagues in the fields for no additional compensation and often performed daily cotton work after normal working hours or on weekends. A mahalla committee chairperson in the Jizzakh region explained

*We [the mahalla committee] were supposed to organize the entire mahalla and mobilize a minimum of 100 people to pick cotton in the name of the mahalla. Forced or mandatory, no matter how you formulate this word, the meaning is the same: to get people to go to the fields and harvest cotton. No one wants to go of their own will to harvest cotton for miserly wages.<sup>11</sup>*



Starting on September 4, columns of busses were organized to take cotton pickers to the fields.

The hokim of Angren, a city in the Tashkent region ordered every enterprise and institution in Angren to provide at least 40% of its workforce to the cotton harvest.<sup>12</sup> At an October 5 cotton meeting, the hokim of the Jizzakh region announced a general khashar in response to worsening weather. He ordered every organization in the region to close and mobilize people to the fields. A local farmer reported that all colleges from cotton producing regions closed, and all second-year students and some first-year students were sent to the fields.<sup>13</sup>

A cotton headquarters monitoring document we obtained details the assignment of labor quotas to various institutions in the district and tracks daily tallies of workers and cotton picked.<sup>14</sup> The document appears to be a standard reporting form for use in any region. It lists all farms in the district and, under each, the organizations required to provide labor to the farms. These organizations include schools, clinics, colleges, private businesses, the post office, and local bazaar. The document specifies the number of workers each organization must provide. It also contains two columns for each day of the cotton harvest, the first noting how many workers each institution provided, and the second how much cotton they picked.

Teachers confirmed that the schools received government orders for them and their students to participate in the harvest. A college instructor from Syrdarya said,

*It's a long chain [of command]. Many are responsible. Really, a lot of people come from the hokimiat, prosecutor's office, administration, to inspect the numbers of students and*

<sup>11</sup> Interview with mahalla committee chairperson, Jizzakh region, November 15, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interview with director of Angren Labor Exchange, a government entity under the direction of the hokimiyat (city administration) of Angren, September 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Report from a farmer [name withheld] present at the cotton meeting, Jizzakh region, October 5, 2015. The cotton producing districts of Jizzakh are: Jizzakh, Pakhtakor, Dustlik, Mirzachul, Arnasai, Zafarabad, Zarbdar, and Zaamin.

<sup>14</sup> A copy of the document is on file with the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights. Publishing it or the identifying the district could identify the source, putting the source at risk of retaliation.



Medical workers on their way to the cotton fields.

*teachers in the fields. The director of the college is in control every day and gives us the orders. We go the fields or don't go according to his orders. He tells us and we do it.”<sup>15</sup>*

A teacher in the Andijan region said, “Of course [the order] comes from above. Leaders from the entire republic participate in the cotton meetings. There, the prime minister gives the orders. The regional and district hokims give orders to school directors. We get lists in August to make preparations, and the directors give the orders to schoolteachers [to pick cotton].<sup>16</sup>

Through an “Urgent Message,” the hokim of the Uchtepa district of Tashkent ordered private company managers to send their employees to pick cotton:

*White gold is a gift for the people of Uzbekistan!*

*On the basis of an order from a Meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers dated August 28, 2015, and to take advantage of favorable weather conditions to harvest the cotton crop without loss, all organizations, enterprises and business entities of the Uchtepa district (Tashkent city), regardless of the form of management, must participate in the cotton harvest.*

*Based on the above, please select \_\_\_\_\_ employees for the cotton harvest. Submit a list of these employees (with copies of passports) according to the attached form to the headquarters of the Uchtepa district hokimiyat (5th floor), by \_\_\_\_\_ hour \_\_ (date) \_\_\_\_\_ 2015.*

*District Khokim signature A. Dosmukhamedov<sup>17</sup>*

Our monitors also obtained copies of orders from private companies directing their employees to pick cotton. For example, the general director of Uzmetkombinat, a metallurgical factory in Bekabad,

<sup>15</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interview with college instructor, Syrdarya region, November 3, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interview with secondary school teacher, Andijan region, November 8, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> A copy of the order is available at: <http://harvestreport2015.uzbekgermanforum.org/?page=evidence>.

in the Tashkent region, issued a written order for 3500 employees to pick cotton, more than 30% of its employees. The director named the managers responsible for fulfilling the recruitment order and provided a table indicating the number of workers each department must provide.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the director of the Angren branch of the joint stock company O'zbekko'mir, ordered the company's workers to pick cotton in the Buka region from September 9 to the end of the season, in a directive signed on September 7.<sup>19</sup> Point 3 of the directive threatens workers with dismissal for refusal to pick cotton or failure to meet the quota.

*Failure to pick cotton or to fulfill the quota, and disciplinary violations (drinking alcoholic beverages, playing games of chance, unauthorized absences, or violations of the sanitary-hygiene rules) by workers, failure to carry out the orders of, or insubordination to, brigade leaders are considered grounds for cancelling the labor contract at the employer's initiative [dismissal], in accordance with the laws of the Republic of Uzbekistan.<sup>20</sup>*

## Students

Students of colleges and universities comprise one of the most numerous and vulnerable groups subjected to forced labor.<sup>21</sup> In Uzbekistan, there are at least 1,600 colleges, universities, and educational institutions with 1.3 million students aged 18 and older. Testimony from students, teachers, parents, and farmers in all regions we monitored taken together with observations by our monitors, documentary evidence, and media reports indicates that in 2015 the government forcibly mobilized students 18 and older – third-year college students and university students – to the fields en masse for shifts of 25 – 40 days and that this mobilization was forced under threat of penalty.

Students told us they feared problems with their studies if they refused to pick. Some were directly threatened with expulsion if they refused to pick cotton. More commonly, however, students told us they feared they would receive poor grades, have disciplinary troubles, and experience difficulty entering university or getting jobs. For example, a college teacher from the Syrdarya region described threatening students to ensure their participation in the harvest, “[We warn] students that if they don't pick cotton they will not receive good grades. We say things to coerce them and ensure they go to the fields; we warn parents that their children will get expelled [if they don't pick cotton.”<sup>22</sup> A student from Kashkadarya said if students refuse to pick cotton “[teachers] tell us we won't



Columns of busses took students to the cotton fields



Students taking the bus to the cotton fields (September 2015).

18 A copy of the order is available at: <http://harvestreport2015.uzbekgermanforum.org/?page=evidence>.

19 Buka is the site of a World Bank-funded project.

20 Directive No. 760 “To Send Employees of the Razrez Angren Branch to the 2015 Cotton Harvest,” N.S. Usmanov, September 7, 2015. A copy of the directive is available at: <http://harvestreport2015.uzbekgermanforum.org/?page=evidence>.

21 In Uzbekistan college is the equivalent of high school; first-year students are usually 16 years old; second-years are usually 17; and third-years are usually 18.

22 Uzbek-German Forum interview with college instructor, Syrdarya region, November 11, 2015.

allow you to come to class, we'll kick you out of college...they won't give grades, saying 'you weren't at the harvest, and so you have to pay a lot of money for newspaper and magazine subscriptions.' They begin to pressure you every which way. They humiliate some students in front of the whole college, swearing at and degrading them in different ways."<sup>23</sup>

In 2015 we observed intensification of efforts to make participation in the cotton harvest appear voluntary, or as a practical component of students' studies or to cover up their participation in the harvest by falsifying attendance records and curriculum journals.

We collected copies of statements signed by students at six educational institutions, all handwritten but substantially similar, in which students wrote that they agree to participate in the cotton harvest "voluntarily" or be subjected to disciplinary action, including expulsion. The statements refer variously to a resolution or meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers ordering mobilization of workers to the harvest. These statements came from students at institutions in different parts of the country, suggesting that they were not the spontaneous invention of individual officials, but part of a larger policy to make cotton picking appear voluntary. For example, a statement signed by a student at the Samarkand State Institute for Architecture and Construction reads:

*I, [name withheld] have familiarized myself with the disciplinary rules and internal regulations of the Samarkand State Institute for Architecture and Construction. I have personally received a warning from the administration of the institute that I will be expelled if I, without a reason, cannot participate in the cotton harvest organized on the basis of decisions of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Hokimiat of Samarkand Region, orders of the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and the Rector of the Institute.*<sup>24</sup>

A September 9 example from the Tashkent University of Information Technology reads:

*To the Rector of the Tashkent University of Information Technologies, Ministry of Higher and Secondary Special Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Muydinov H.A.*

*I [name withheld], a student in the telecommunications department of Tashkent University of Information Technology, will be actively involved of my own will in the harvest of cotton, the wealth of the state, in 2015. I will take an active part in cotton harvest on my own will. Statement written and signed by myself.*<sup>25</sup>



One letter written by a student at the Tashkent Institute for Irrigation and Melioration refers to cotton picking as an "internship," and notes that "I have been warned about participation in practical work in the cotton harvest of 2015 to execute the protocol 'On Assembly on the preparation to cotton harvest in Syrdarya region in 2015,' of the Cabinet of Ministers of 15, August 2015."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interview with college student, Kashkadarya region, November 5, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> See Documentary Evidence, available at: <http://harvestreport2015.uzbekgermanforum.org/?page=evidence>.

<sup>25</sup> A copy of the letter is available at: <http://harvestreport2015.uzbekgermanforum.org/?page=evidence>.

<sup>26</sup> A copy of the letter is available at: <http://harvestreport2015.uzbekgermanforum.org/?page=evidence>.

A college instructor in Karakalpakstan confirmed

*We get statements from parents saying 'I am not opposed to my child taking part in the work of the college.' We, a teacher and a mahalla committee member, visit parents whose children refuse to go to the fields. We acquaint them with the recent orders and directives of the government regarding students' education and their participation in the work and activities of the college. Parents are required to send their son or daughter to the harvest.<sup>27</sup>*

When asked if a college that sent first-, second-, and third-year students to pick cotton asked parents' permission, a teacher responded,

*No, why would we ask such a question? Don't you know our rules? The cotton harvest is the obligation of every citizen. We took a statement from the parents of first- and second-year students that from their side they will not allow their first- and second-year children to pick cotton. If they do, they accept full responsibility and are even prepared to accept the appropriate punishment. I even signed that kind of note for my son, who is a first-year student.<sup>28</sup>*

A farmer in Jizzakh told us of the conundrum faced by educational institutions ordered at once to send their students to the fields while at the same time appearing to function in case of inspection.

*Today in [district withheld] the heads of the college received notification that the ILO inspection teams are coming to inspect them. They are terrified... They said 'if the hokim and prosecutor allow us, we would be happy to take the first- and second-year students out of the fields and return them to class, but they demand that we provide a certain number of third-years. But 70% of the third-years ran away. Of 200 third-years we can only get 40. So we send first- and second-years [to make up the difference]...if we don't send the required amount we'll get in trouble with the hokim and prosecutor. But if the first- and second-years aren't in class when the ILO comes, we'll also get in trouble with the hokim and prosecutor.<sup>29</sup>*

## Education and Medical Workers

Education and health sector workers were another group forced en masse to work in the cotton fields in 2015. Notwithstanding the government's stated commitments not to recruit teachers and health care workers, our research shows no discernible difference in the forced mobilization of these workers in 2015 from previous years, when they were also forcibly recruited in large numbers.<sup>30</sup> Officials sent teachers and medical workers to pick cotton for rotating shifts of 15 – 25 days or for single extended shifts of up to 40 days during the 2015 harvest. Those who had completed their shifts or did not



Announcement at a clinic in Jizzak Region:  
"Everyone went to the cotton harvest".

27 Uzbek-German Forum interview with college instructor, Karakalpakstan, November 3, 2015.

28 Uzbek-German Forum interview with college teacher, Jizzakh region, November 5, 2015.

29 Report from a farmer in the Jizzakh region to the Uzbek-German Forum.

30 Statistics from 2013 indicate close to 1 million medical and social services providers in Uzbekistan and more than 1.6 million employees in the fields of education, culture, arts, and sciences. 45% of Uzbekistan's population of more than 30 million are under age 24, indicating a high number of teachers and instructors. See "Альманах Узбекистан 2013 [Uzbekistan Almanac 2013]," Center for Economic Research, available at: [http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/prgm/cph/experts/uzbekistan/01\\_general\\_info/Almanach\\_Uzbekistana\\_2013\\_RUS.pdf](http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/hlm/prgm/cph/experts/uzbekistan/01_general_info/Almanach_Uzbekistana_2013_RUS.pdf).

pick cotton were forcibly mobilized to work on weekends and after normal working hours. As in other sectors, approximately 40% of employees from educational and medical institutions were mobilized at a time, in some cases more.

According to the ILO's observers "schools and hospitals functioned normally," although the report noted that some attendance records were apparently altered. On the contrary, we found that the forced mobilization to the cotton harvest undermined the provision of basic services. Schools, hospitals, and clinics struggled to operate while significant portions of their workforce were in the fields.

Employees of the health and education sectors are among the lowest paid professionals in Uzbekistan, but tend to enjoy relatively stable employment. In interview after interview, employees of these sectors told us that they picked cotton for the sole reason that they feared losing their jobs above all. A nurse from Syrdarya told us:

*We have no understanding of the ability to refuse to pick cotton. People who work in public institutions are those who are prepared to tolerate [forced work]. Of course no one wants to lose his job. The chief doctor tells us 'I don't send you to the fields of my own accord. I am also only carrying out orders.' You need to understand him. He says he is required to fire any employee who refuses to work. There are a lot of unemployed people. Especially those who have completed medical training, with diplomas in hand, looking for jobs. He warned us, if any of us don't like to pick cotton, he'll hire one of them.<sup>31</sup>*

A college instructor from Jizzakh said, "The college has instituted that every teacher must do his time [picking cotton]. Because if one doesn't go, the burden falls to another. Therefore even invalid and elderly teachers do their time. They either send one of their children to pick cotton or hire someone... Of course it would be better if we could just do our jobs. But we demand little. No one asks us. They only order us. And it is impossible to refuse."<sup>32</sup>

As in previous years, in 2015 teachers and medical workers told us that they must pay significant bribes to secure employment.<sup>33</sup> This fact raises the cost to workers who may attempt to refuse to pick cotton – not only do they risk their jobs, they face financial costs in securing new employment. It was a major factor cited by the education and health care employees we interviewed for why they felt they could not refuse to pick cotton.

The notion that these workers embrace the harvest as an "opportunity" is borne out neither by logic nor our research, since nearly everyone we interviewed said that they did not earn much picking cotton, while picking cotton imposed costs on families, caused physical stress, and professional disruption. All teachers, doctors, and other professionals we interviewed said they would rather do their own jobs than pick cotton. None of the doctors or teachers we interviewed said that they were willing to pick cotton or viewed the harvest as a means to supplement their incomes. Instead, they

---

31 Uzbek-German Forum interview with nurse, Syrdarya region, November 10, 2015.

32 Uzbek-German Forum interview with a college teacher who was forced to pick cotton, Jizzakh region, November 5, 2015.

33 For example, we documented the case of a nurse who paid \$200 to get a job in a hospital that paid the equivalent of \$40 per month, and the case of a pediatrician with nine years' training who in unable to find employment because she does not have \$2000 required to pay a bribe. Uzbek-German Forum interview with nurse, Tashkent, September 2015; and Uzbek-German Forum interview with pediatrician, Tashkent, September 2015.

told us that they incurred direct costs, for food and necessities or replacement workers, as well as additional professional burdens. Regarding the mobilization of medical personnel, a source told us:

*No one has any motivation to pick cotton of their own will because it pays very little. You bend over all day to pick 50 kilos of cotton and get paid only 8,000 soum (approximately \$1.50 USD). The government has promised 230 soum per kilo. When the money to pay the workers gets to the bank, the tax collectors withhold 8% for income tax, in total 30 soum per kilo, leaving 200 soum. And here the cotton collection headquarters accepts physical kilograms [the amount actually picked] but pays for conditional kilograms [clean cotton with no moisture or debris] and so for first harvest cotton it withholds about 10%. And then there are shortages, undercounting, mistakes by the farmer, falsification of the scales at the cotton headquarters and in the end the picker receives only 8,000 soum for 50 kilograms picked. The only ones who have desire [to pick] are those who are hired by people from Tashkent [as replacement workers]. People from Tashkent pay 10,000 – 25,000 (approximately \$1.67 – 4.17 USD) daily in cash to everyone they hire in addition to what they are paid for the cotton. A nurse would never go pick cotton of her own accord. She only goes because she is afraid to lose her job. To get hired as a nurse requires a bribe, minimum \$100 or the equivalent of a month's wages.<sup>34</sup>*

A medical worker from Bukhara said, "My family received no profit from cotton. My family only suffered losses."<sup>35</sup> A medical worker in Syrdarya reported a similar experience:

*I was at the harvest around 40 days. I earned 600,000 soum [approximately \$100 USD]. But let's say 30% went for food, maybe even more... I spent 20% on clothes [for harvesting]. Half of my income went to expenses for cotton. And the remaining 300,000 soum [approximately \$50 USD] I spent on supplies for my children. I worked for 40 days with no rest and half the income went to expenses! I didn't buy anything for myself, I spent the 40-day profit on my children in one day. It's not much money.<sup>36</sup>*

In 2015 we received consistent reports from all regions monitored that, like with students, some teachers and medical workers were required to sign statements that their participation in the harvest was voluntary. Tellingly, often the statements included a note indicating that the person would be willing to accept disciplinary action or punishment if they opted not to pick.<sup>37</sup> For example, a doctor from Andijan said that

*Before we were sent to the fields they made every employee sign a statement that 'I am going to the cotton harvest by my own volition, I will not organize weddings or celebrations [during the harvest], I will not go anywhere else, I will not even go out for recreation.' We all wrote these statements by hand and signed them ourselves because it also included the statement that 'otherwise I am prepared to accept any punishment by the administration.' And so I signed it even though I didn't want to because if they fire me, where will I go at my age?<sup>38</sup>*

34 Uzbek-German Forum, Jizzakh region monitor's report, January 27, 2016.

35 Uzbek-German Forum interview with medical worker, Bukhara region, November 7, 2015.

36 Uzbek-German Forum interview with medical worker, Syrdarya region, November 10, 2015.

37 Chronicle 4 "Ихтиро: Ирригация талабаларидан пахтага чиқиш ҳақида "ваъда хати" олинди," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty "Ozodlik," 8 September 2015, <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/27233035.html>.

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

An orderly from Andijan said she had to write a “guarantee letter,” stating that she picked cotton of her own will, although in reality cotton picking was “state policy” and therefore “mandatory.”<sup>39</sup> A nurse from Kashkadarya said “they took a statement from everyone saying we’d go pick cotton. If you complain they will say, ‘well, you yourself wrote that you were willing to pick cotton.’ So who could you complain to?”<sup>40</sup>

## Pick or Pay

People who could not pick cotton or did not want to pick cotton could pay to get out of it. In some cases employees paid their directors or students paid school or college administrators. In other cases people paid a replacement worker to pick cotton in his or her name. The pick or pay scheme constitutes a direct violation of labor rights. Employees made payments to avoid picking cotton solely because they were threatened with losing their jobs and other penalties if they refused to comply. People who paid were required to deliver a quota, either pick a certain number of days or deliver a certain amount of cotton. They had to fulfill that quota either by working themselves or paying someone else to work. This did not constitute a voluntary payment or a contribution to communal work, but a payment extracted under threat of penalty. In this way, the “pick or pay” scheme is a violation of the right to be free from forced labor.



It is possible to bypass the cotton picking by paying bribes to the supervisor or by paying someone else to pick as substitute.

Further, the system is plagued by corruption and a lack of transparency that suggests officials are individually and directly benefitting from the forced labor system by extorting money from people under threat of penalty. People who made direct payments to their employers or administrators told the Uzbek-German Forum that they did not receive any confirmation of payments or receipts, and they did not have any way of knowing how the money would actually be used.

One man from the Tashkent regions whose wife paid to get out of picking said, “My wife is an eye doctor in a clinic in [district withheld]. She is 53 years old. She paid the head doctor 400,000 soum [approximately \$66.67 USD] and provided a mattress, pillow, and bedding, apparently for the worker ‘they would hire with her money.’ There are 25 doctors and 46 nurses in the clinic. No one knows where the money is going! It’s a big hit to our family budget.”<sup>41</sup>

In 2015, replacement workers cost approximately 10,000 – 25,000 soum [approximately \$1.67 – 4.17 USD] per day of work, an increase from previous years, and in some cases people paid food and transportation costs in addition to wages. A teacher from Andijan told us that in 2014 she paid for a replacement worker but this year she picked cotton because hiring a replacement was simply too expensive.

*Last year I paid [the replacement worker] 10,000 soum per day. That’s a lot of money for me and this year it was even more expensive. Replacement workers were paid between 15,000 – 20,000 soum [approximately \$2.50 – 3.34 USD] per day. You need to pay for food on*

39 Uzbek-German Forum interview with medical worker, Andijan region, November 13, 2015.

40 Uzbek-German Forum interview with a nurse who was forced to pick cotton, Kashkadarya region, November 10, 2015.

41 Uzbek-German Forum Tashkent region monitor’s mid-season report, October 2015.

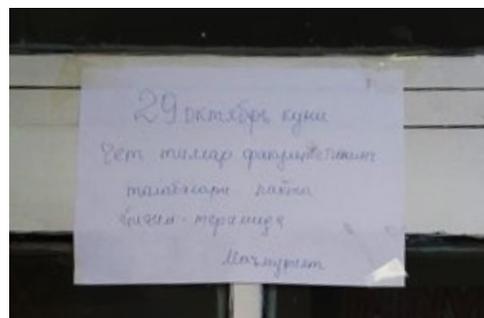
top of that, about 100,000 soum [approximately \$16.67] for 10 days for every replacement worker. And it's hard to find them. It's the only way to get out of picking cotton unless you have close relationships with the authorities.<sup>42</sup>

## Mobilization of Teachers and Impact on Education

Many colleges and universities shut down or operated at reduced levels during the harvest, holding classes sporadically or only for first and second-year students who were not mobilized en masse in 2015. Schools experienced significant disruptions, simultaneously expected to provide teachers and staff to harvest cotton while also under pressure to maintain the semblance of normal operations. Many schools shortened the school day because teachers were forced to pick cotton for daily shifts during the week as well as on weekends. In some cases children also picked cotton during the day, for example attending lessons in the morning and going to the fields for several hours in the afternoon. Some teachers attempted to teach multiple classes simultaneously, to cover their own teaching load as well as that of colleagues in the fields. They did not receive additional pay for this extra work.

The ILO noted that class registers appear to have been falsified, though it did not indicate how it took this observation into account when making its conclusions. Indeed, schoolteachers as well as college and university instructors in every region we monitored told us that they falsified class registers and curriculum journals to make it appear as though they had complete attendance and covered topics normally, when in fact they experienced absences or closures due to the harvest and skipped or combined topics from the curriculum to compensate for lost instructional time. They did this on the order of supervisors or local education officials. A college teacher from Karakalpakstan noted that the teachers falsify ledgers to make it appear as though students who picked cotton were really in class: "During the harvest the educational program is not cut. Officially, all students are in class and no one, not even for a day, was in the fields!"<sup>43</sup>

All teachers, students, and parents interviewed said that the harvest had a significant detrimental impact on the quality of education. Everyone we interviewed reported that educational institutions lost up to two months of instructional time due to the harvest and these findings were consistent across regions and among school, college, and university teachers. In most cases schools, colleges, and universities attempted to compensate for lost educational time by speeding through material



Inscription on the Poster: "On the 29th of October, the students of foreign language faculty are at the cotton harvest."



Exercise book of 6-year school pupil from a school in Andijan City. Inscription on October 14, 2015: "Cotton → Day off".

<sup>42</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interview with a schoolteacher, Andijan region, November 8, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Uzbek-German Forum interview with college instructor, Karakalpakstan, Turtkul district, November 3, 2015.

in the weeks following the harvest, covering several topics in a single class period, by foregoing the November recess, or by lengthening the school day.

A teacher from Andijan said

*In the registers we write the topics that we were supposed to have covered. For example, on September 7 you write that you covered four topics and, while you were [actually] picking cotton with your group you made it to the 10th topic. If you continue from that point, the students won't understand anything. And so we continue, covering two topics at once until we catch up to what is written in the register. As a result, our students are becoming less and less educated. The situation is the same in colleges. Students who want to continue their education must hire private tutors [to catch up]. That's why all our best students leave the country. They don't want themselves or their children to live in such conditions.*<sup>44</sup>

Another said, "During class we try not to cut but to catch up. We have [extra] lessons every day [to make up the material]. But, one way or another the cotton harvest affects the quality of education. To be honest, many students don't stay for the extra lessons. But we fill in the class registers anyway. That is, on paper we write that we covered all the lessons and that the students even received marks, that everything is OK."<sup>45</sup>

A teacher from Andijan said that "teachers received their salaries, even for the lessons they missed [while they picked cotton]. Who is this bad for? The pupils! After the harvest we cover two or three lessons during every period, and do not cover them completely. The pupils can't grasp it all. Is this really good?"<sup>46</sup>

## Mobilization of Medical Workers and Impact on Health Care

As in previous years, in 2015 officials ordered hospitals and clinics to send employees, including doctors and nurses, to pick cotton. Respondents told up that up 40 – 50% of the medical staff of hospitals and clinics were picking cotton for the duration of the harvest, and in some cases many more employees were mobilized but some staff, especially doctors, opted to pay instead of pick, so they could see patients. Even while some hospitals and clinics remained open, the harvest burdened the remaining staff, forcing them to work overtime for no additional pay and to risk providing unqualified services. Medical staff also described postponing preventative care.

A nurse from the Yakkabog district of Kashkadarya said

*The harvest strongly affects [the quality of medical services]. For example, if 60 – 70% of doctors are at the harvest but the number of patients stays the same? We especially see cases of hepatitis and flu in the autumn. We get more patients in the autumn than any other time of year but [the staff] are picking cotton. Everyone has his own caseload. I am responsible for five wards. But after I go to the fields the nurse left behind has to look after ten wards instead or even more. If work normally done by two or three people is done by one? Will it affect the quality? Especially if we need to do a lot of surgeries but all the doctors are picking cotton, and there is only one doctor left, how can he handle all the cases?*<sup>47</sup>

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

45 Uzbek-German Forum interview with college instructor, Jizzakh region, November 9, 2015.

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

47 Uzbek-German Forum interview with a nurse, Kashkadarya region, November 7, 2015.

A doctor from Andijan reported that of the 80 staff at her clinic, 50 picked cotton at a time on rotating shifts, leaving only 30 to provide medical services. She said that this had a negative effect on patient health: “And what do you think happened to the patients [while we were picking cotton]? Therapists were treating ear infections and gynecologists were treating children because the other doctors were picking cotton.”<sup>48</sup> In the Shahrisabz district of the Kashkadarya region, of the 30 employees of a rural medical clinic, only four worked at the clinic during the harvest – the guard, an accountant, one doctor, and one nurse – the rest picked cotton, leaving the residents without basic health care.<sup>49</sup>

In another example, the complete mobilization of the clinic’s staff effectively closed the clinic. All 46 employees – 10 doctors, 10 technicians, and 26 nurses – of a rural medical clinic in the Jizzakh region were sent to pick cotton full time starting October 5. After two days the 10 doctors and the head nurse paid replacement workers to pick cotton so they could return to the clinic to treat patients. Yet they found the main entrance to the clinic closed and a sign hanging from it declaring, “EVERYONE IS AT THE COTTON FIELDS.” Patients accessed the clinic through the emergency door. It is unclear why the doctors would need to hide the fact that the clinic was functioning unless they feared retaliation from the officials who had ordered them to the fields. The nurses and technicians who picked cotton were those who could not afford to pay replacement workers.<sup>50</sup>

## Forced Child Labor

Although child labor did not occur on a systematic or mass scale in 2015, it remained a persistent feature of Uzbekistan’s cotton harvest.<sup>51</sup> The continued use of child labor reflects the key problem of coercion inherent in the cotton system in Uzbekistan. Although local officials and school and college administrators generally understood that they should not send children to the fields, they were simultaneously under enormous pressure from central officials to deliver harvest quotas or face penalties and in some cases resorted to the use of child labor. A third-year student from Jizzakh forced to pick cotton told us, “They started bringing second-year students to the fields on September 21 and first-years on September 26, and brought them back to class on September 30. They were brought to help us. They weren’t counted as first- and second-year students, they were counted as help for the third-years.”<sup>52</sup> A college teacher from Jizzakh told us that the college resorted to mobilizing second-year students to fulfill their recruitment requirements.



Usually, cotton pickers sleep on the floor - on mattresses they have to bring with them from home.

*We have just 600 students in our college, 200 in each year. We brought 200 people to the fields right away, that is, third-year students. But many students were absent. So we covered the gap by sending other groups to the fields – second-year students, so it wouldn’t be noticeable. So in case the ILO suddenly shows up it would look like classes for second-year students were still taking place. So one group would pick and then others would come*

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

49 Uzbek-German Forum Kashkadarya region monitor’s report, October 15, 2015.

50 Uzbek-German Forum Jizzakh monitor’s report, October 2015.

51 Harvesting cotton is considered hazardous work unsuitable for children of any age and children are protected from picking cotton under international and Uzbek law.

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

to take their place. And the third-year students picked from beginning to end... We worked that way for 40 days.<sup>53</sup>

A teacher in Kashkadarya said,

*We know [about laws prohibiting the use of forced labor]. And that's why they stopped forcing out the younger [college classes] for overnight shifts picking. It's forbidden to send children to do hard labor? Well, that's why, as much as they are able, colleges and schools try to comply with that rule. But where cotton is concerned, we can't do anything. We send them to the harvest anyway. The harvest requires a lot of people. And that's why we send [children]. Even though it's not like it used to be, with overnight shifts, we send them for daily shifts, there is no other way.<sup>54</sup>*

Some institutions that mobilized children to pick cotton sought ways to avoid accountability for child labor by making parents sign statements saying that they would accept the consequences if their first- or second-year student (usually 16 or 17 years old) picked cotton, even when the colleges were forcibly mobilizing these students.<sup>55</sup>

Ultimately, the continued mobilization of adult labor through coercive means also contributed to child labor. Although many people we interviewed were aware that children should not pick cotton, they were also aware that adults should also not be subjected to forced labor. In the face of massive forced labor, these norms do not appear meaningful. A teacher in Andijan told us "In our school the children were not sent to the harvest. But children went to the fields to help their parents after school anyway. In the school where I work, during the cotton harvest 25 children from the 6 – 9th grades [approximately ages 11 – 14] didn't come to school at all, they were helping their parents [pick cotton] and the school administration shut its eyes.<sup>56</sup>



The enhanced Awareness Campaign against the use of child labor during the cotton harvest could not completely eliminate the problem.

53 Uzbek-German Forum interview with college teacher, Jizzakh region, November 5, 2015.

54 Uzbek-German Forum interview with college teacher, Kashkadarya region, November 10, 2015.

55 Uzbek-German Forum interview with parent, Jizzakh region, November 2, 2015.

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