

Continued use of forced labour in the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan

The annual cotton harvest has begun in Uzbekistan, a country where the state-controlled cotton industry is a key source of government revenue. For years, widespread use of forced labour has characterized the cotton harvest. As a result of international pressure, beginning last year, the authorities took steps to limit the participation of younger children in cotton picking. However, while the use of forced child labour has decreased, the emphasis has increasingly shifted to other forms of forced labour, as illustrated by the statement below by the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan, a local partner group of International Partnership for Human Rights. This trend highlights the importance of a broader approach to the issue of forced labour in Uzbekistan's cotton harvest, covering also coercive and abusive strategies used in the recruitment of adult cotton pickers, including in international monitoring of the situation. For the first time this year the Uzbek government has agreed to allow a mission from the International Labour Organization into the country to monitor the cotton harvest. This is a welcome step; however, at the same time, there are concerns that the mission has only a limited mandate and that it will conduct monitoring together with Uzbek authorities, which may restrict its opportunities to access cotton fields and workers and to address different aspects of the cotton harvest in a comprehensive manner.¹

Statement by the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan: Mass mobilisation of citizens for cotton harvest in Uzbekistan

15 September 2013

As of mid-September mass deployment of citizens for the annual cotton harvest began across Uzbekistan. While participation in the cotton harvest is portrayed as being voluntary, authorities are using threats, forced labour and other abusive practices to mobilise participants. It is expected that up to 2.5 million citizens may be mobilised for the cotton harvest in total.

In the capital Tashkent, the number of those mobilised for cotton picking is expected to exceed 200,000. Among these are employees of state organisations and institutions, such as government ministries and departments, regional government bodies, water and energy utility companies, hospitals and health centres, and schools, kindergartens and other educational institutions. Those working in small and medium businesses, such as in the service, trade, finance, banking, construction and consumer goods production sectors are also targeted.

Local government officials use different tactics of intimidation and coercion when mobilising cotton harvest labour. For example, employees at state institutions are threatened with dismissal should they refuse to participate in the cotton harvest. At the same time, they are typically pressured into signing statements that they will go and collect cotton voluntarily. In another tactic, both employees at state institutions and business representatives are made to pay for someone else to pick cotton instead of

¹ See Statement from the Cotton Campaign on the Start of the Cotton Harvest in Uzbekistan, 9 September 2013, <http://www.cottoncampaign.org/2013/09/09/statement-from-the-cotton-campaign-on-the-start-of-the-cotton-harvest-in-uzbekistan/>

going to the cotton fields themselves. Those recruited for such “sponsored” labour are often internal migrant workers who have come to Tashkent from other parts of Uzbekistan in search of temporary short-term jobs. The going daily rate for replacements in cotton picking is now about 50,000 soms (some 20 USD according to the widely used black market rate). The Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU) has learned that recruitment of “sponsored” cotton pickers has also taken place in the largest market place in Tashkent (*Eski Dzhuva*). Traders have been offered payments in the form of sums demanded from well-to-do businessmen, such as store and restaurant owners, for going to pick cotton.

As in previous years, students at universities and colleges have also been mobilised for forced labour in the cotton harvest in different regions of the country.

According to IGIHRDU’s information, authorities have carried out propaganda campaigns targeted at the heads of state organisations, educational institutions and companies where cotton pickers are mobilised to ensure that those who participate in the cotton harvest tell any “outsiders” who may approach them, such as journalists and foreigners that they collect cotton voluntarily and want to contribute to the economy of their country.

The cotton harvest takes place during a period of 45-60 days, and the government has set out to collect a total of about 3.5 million ton of raw cotton this year.

The Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan is an independent non-governmental organization founded in 2002. Based in Tashkent, with members in different parts of the country, it defends and promotes human rights across Uzbekistan.

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