

Coalition Against Forced Child Labour in Uzbekistan

NEWSLETTER

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COALITION HOSTS ROUNDTABLE IN BREMEN

On April 3, 2008, the Coalition Against Forced Child Labour in Uzbekistan hosted a roundtable in Bremen, Germany. This roundtable was organised on the margins of the one of the major global conferences for the cotton industry, the 29th International Cotton Conference, organized by the Bremen Cotton Exchange.

The roundtable was attended by the representatives of the following organizations:

- European Commission
- Council of Europe
- International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC)
- Environmental Justice Foundation
- School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)
- Human Rights Watch
- International Crisis Group (ICG)
- Eurasian Transition Group
- Association "Human Rights in Central Asia"

- Uzbekistan Initiative – London
- Internationale Arbeitsgruppe für Friedensarbeit, gemeinnützig
- Open Society Institute
- Deutsche Welle
- Radio Free Europe/Liberty
- various freelance journalists

The first presentation was made by Alisher Ilkhamov, a social scientist from the School for Oriental and African Studies (UK), who gave a general overview of the Uzbek cotton industry. He described how the cotton industry in Uzbekistan is managed essentially in the Soviet style. Even after the de-collectivization the sector remains highly centralised, with private farmers subject to various mechanisms of administrative coercion and control, including a state monopoly for cotton procurement which forces farmers to sell at low prices. These low prices, along with the state's monopoly control of the market for farming inputs, ensure that the ruling elite reaps most of the benefit from cotton exports. Although cotton is such an important source of export revenue for Uzbekistan, it is extremely unattractive for farmers and farm workers.

Rather than work in their own country, Uzbek farm workers prefer to pick cotton for significantly higher wages in neighbouring Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where procurement prices are two to three times higher than in Uzbekistan. This labour shortage caused by low wages explains why the Uzbek government is so dependent on forced child labour to keep the cotton industry going.

In Ilkhamov's view, the malaise of the Uzbek cotton industry could be addressed through decentralization, de-monopolisation and most of all by releasing farmers from the directive plans, or quotas, which obliges them to deliver cotton to the state and state controlled cotton gins and traders. This would lead to higher revenues flowing to the farmers, and therefore higher wages which would attract back to Uzbekistan part of the Uzbek labour migrants working elsewhere in Central Asia, or in Russia.

Ilkhamov's introduction was followed by a presentation from Ismail Dadajanov, a civil society activist from Uzbekistan who was formerly employed in the textile industry. He cited real-life examples to demonstrate in vivid detail what farmers must undergo before they can earn real cash for their labour. Dadajanov's speech was followed by a presentation of photographs which provided visual evidence about the practice of forced child labour in Uzbekistan. Thomas Grabka, a prominent German photojournalist, travelled in 2004 to several regions in Uzbekistan to photograph children working in the cotton fields. Grabka commented his own photos and shared his experiences while visiting Uzbekistan's cotton-producing regions.

Speaking on behalf of the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC), an organization which represents the global cotton industry, the group's Executive Director Terry Townsend said that his organization has not traditionally dealt with labour issues. However he did say that his organization planned to cooperate with the ILO and UNICEF to conduct a survey of labour conditions in Uzbekistan's cotton sector. This announcement was welcomed by the Uzbek civil society activists and international NGOs, but with caution. Many participants emphasized their doubts that the Uzbek authorities would grant enough freedom of access to allow for a fair and unbiased survey. It was generally agreed that such a survey was necessary, but it was felt that it would be difficult to conduct such a study under the present political conditions in Uzbekistan of harsh censorship and state control of information.

Nadejda Atayeva, representing a France-based NGO, the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia, spoke about the Uzbek activists and members of the intelligentsia who have raised the issue of forced child labour, and the consequences they have faced as a result. A number of Uzbek human rights defenders who dealt with child labour issues are currently in prison, including Mutabar Tajibaeva, who was sentenced to eight years in prison on March 6, 2006. Another activist, Azam Farmonov from Sirdarya region, was sentenced to nine years in prison on June 16, 2006 for defending the rights of some farmers who had decided not to deliver their cotton quota. These farmers had been punished by the local authorities with physical abuse and the confiscation of their land.

In total, according to Atayeva, over the course of the past few years, 57 human rights defenders and civil society activists have been harassed by the authorities; 20 journalists have been forced to

leave the country and seek asylum abroad; and 27 civil society activists remain in jail. "We have invited 13 activists from Uzbekistan, including five farmers, to attend to this roundtable in Germany, but they were not granted exit visas—which are another remnant of the Soviet totalitarian system—and therefore were not able to travel," said Atayeva.

At the end of the roundtable, Shahida Yakub, director of the UK-based NGO Uzbekistan Initiative—London, presented a list of demands to international organizations on behalf of the Coalition Against Forced Child Labour in Uzbekistan. The Coalition called on the European Union to adjust the tariff preferences given to Uzbek cotton, and textiles produced from it, under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP). It also called on the EU to introduce a system of ethical labelling that would allow European customers to identify whether the goods they buy are free from the stain of forced child labour.

Among the Coalition's other demands as presented by Yakub was that the international cotton industry, through its representative associations such as ICAC and similar organizations, act to protect the overall reputation of the cotton industry by introducing defined ethical standards and by encouraging the Uzbek government to adopt these standards, particularly with regard to child labour. Yakub argued that it is not in the cotton industry's interests for ICAC to shield the Uzbek government from international criticism relating to child labour violations in the cotton industry, since this will ultimately cast a shadow over the entire industry globally. The Coalition also called upon UNICEF and ILO to make information publicly available about the steps they are taking to promote child and labour rights in Uzbekistan, along with information about their contacts and communications with local stakeholders as they attempt to address these issues.

The evidence presented by these Uzbek activists was confirmed by Rachel Denber and Andrea Berg, two representatives of the Human Rights Watch. Berg, who was the HRW representative in Uzbekistan for two years, made a series of observations about the problems with human rights and children's rights in the Uzbek cotton industry which corresponded with the comments made earlier in the roundtable.

Juliette Williams from the Environmental Justice Foundation made a presentation describing the communications of her organization with European retailers and EU institutions. She emphasized that retailers tended to demonstrate good awareness of the problem of forced child labour in the Uzbek cotton industry, and said that many are already

taking measures to remove Uzbek cotton from their supply chains.

Representatives of the European Commission and Council of Europe who participated in the roundtable assured the assembled participants that they would relay the information gathered at the Bremen roundtable to their offices and colleagues, and that they would take steps to ensure that the issue of forced child labour in Uzbekistan will be taken seriously by European institutions in the future.

COALITION MEETS WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF THE INTERNATIONAL COTTON INDUSTRY

On April 4, 2008, members of the Coalition together with the Campaign Director at the Environmental Justice Foundation, Juliette Williams, were invited for an meeting with representatives of the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC) and the Bremen Cotton Exchange.

The following representatives of the cotton industry participated in the meeting:

- Terry Townsend, Executive Director, ICAC;
- Rafiq Chaudhry, Head of the Technical Information Section, ICAC;
- Francesca Mancini, Vice Chair of Expert Panel on Social, Environmental and Economic Performance of Cotton, ICAC;
- Jens Soth, Helvetas, member of Expert Panel on Social, Environmental and Economic Performance of Cotton, ICAC;
- Jan Wellmann, Executive Director, Bremen Cotton Exchange;
- Elke Hortmeyer, Director of Economic Research, Bremen Cotton Exchange;
- Alois Schönberger, Member of the Board, Gdynia Cotton Association;
- Zbigniew Rostwitalski, Executive Vice President, Gdynia Cotton Association;
- Andrzej Drozd, Chief Cotton Expert, Gdynia Cotton Association.

Two main topics dominated the discussion: First, the credibility and reliability of the data provided by Uzbek activists and by ICAC; and second, the forthcoming research survey by ICAC, the ILO

and UNICEF regarding labour conditions in the cotton industry of Uzbekistan.

Before this meeting, Terry Townsend had been quoted dismissing allegations of child labour in the Uzbekistan cotton industry as “exaggerated” and “absurd,” and furthermore arguing that those who raised this issue were harming the cotton industry, saying that “I assume that the cotton industry of Uzbekistan can be proud of its contribution to enhancing the lives of well-being of the people.” The meeting in Bremen was important to break the ice and begin dialogue on these issues and provide information that would encourage the representatives of the cotton industry to question their assumptions.

The representatives of the cotton industry expressed some doubts about the sources of information being cited by Uzbek activists and presented by the Coalition. The Coalition representatives had their own questions about what sources the ICAC and other cotton industry organizations have been relying to support their dismissals of the problem of forced child labour in Uzbekistan, particularly now that there is substantial photographic and film evidence in the public domain. ICAC admitted that up to this point their only sources of information about the situation have been the government of Uzbekistan and a number of official state agencies which deal with cotton. The activists pointed out that their evidence on the subject was based on data provided by numerous independent observers, including fieldwork conducted by local and international human rights activists and journalists.

Mr. Townsend put a major emphasis on the efforts being planned jointly by ICAC, the ILO and UNICEF to conduct a comprehensive survey of labour conditions in Uzbekistan this autumn. This survey, although useful and necessary, is not designed to address the issue of forced child labour in particular; it will instead concentrate on labour conditions in general.

The Coalition and EJF voiced their concerns about the likely objectivity of this study under the current strict censorship imposed by the Uzbek regime upon all information outflow regarding the issues of human rights in Uzbekistan. As Nadejda Atayeva, Coalition member, pointed out in her notes, a number of Uzbek human rights activists and independent journalists have suffered harassment and persecution by the Uzbek authorities after trying to collect data and raise public awareness on this issue. The amendments to the Criminal Code adopted on February 17, 2004 (Clause 157) made it a serious crime—one that is considered as high treason and punishable by 10 to 20 years in

prison—to relay to foreign organizations any information collected in Uzbekistan that might be considered hostile toward Uzbekistan. In practice it is clear that this law is meant to apply to any information critical of the situation with regard to human rights in the country.

The evidence of state-orchestrated child labour in Uzbekistan is already overwhelming. What is needed now is action by the government of Uzbekistan to meet its commitments and end child labour. Ms. Williams argued that the ILO, UNICEF and ICAC should be using their combined weight to achieve change that would benefit the Uzbek people, as well as the cotton industry, both inside Uzbekistan and internationally.

EJF and the representatives of Uzbek civil society asked whether a working group could be established to ensure the objectivity of the study. In response, Mr. Townsend did not rule out the possibility of including representatives of the Uzbek civil society to work on the survey.

The representatives of the Coalition and EJF assured ICAC and the other industry representatives that the purpose of their campaign is not to damage the world cotton industry. On the contrary, it was argued that if ICAC were to push

for the eradication of forced child labour in a major cotton producing country such as Uzbekistan, it would be fulfilling its declared mission of working for a healthy and ethical cotton industry. The sole goal of the Coalition, according to the Uzbek activists present at the meeting, is to stop Uzbek children being used as slaves for the benefit of a narrow ruling elite, and to secure for these children access to education and health care.

By the end of the discussion, Mr. Townsend's tone was notably more conciliatory than it had been at the start of the meeting. He admitted that in the past he had made some "undisciplined" comments about the subject of forced child labour in Uzbekistan, and assured the group that his main concern was the overall reputation of the global cotton industry. The representatives of the Coalition responded that they were ready to cooperate with ICAC to the same end, but emphasized that the reputation of the cotton industry could be guaranteed only by adequately addressing the issue of forced child labour, and not by ignoring it.

ICAC and the other representatives of the cotton industry found this proposal correct in principle, and they said that they would continue their dialogue with the ILO, UNICEF and the Uzbek civil society on this matter.

COALITION MEMBERS MEET MEMBER OF BUNDESTAG

On April 5, 2008, representatives of the Coalition met in Bremen with Marieluise Beck a Green Party member of Bundestag representing Bremen and a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). Mrs. Beck is also a member of Bundestag's committee on foreign affairs who focuses in particular on the Balkans, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The Bremen Cotton Exchange (Bremer Baumwollbörse), which is located in Mrs. Beck's constituency, has been increasing its import of Uzbek cotton from year to year. This fact as well as the fact that Germany leads the European Union dialogue on human rights with the Uzbek government led the members of the Coalition to push for the Bundestag and other German state institutions to make the issue of forced child labour an essential part of this dialogue.

Ms. Beck was kind enough to agree to the Coalition representatives' request for a meeting. She was accompanied at this meeting by some of her local colleagues and associates as well as

NGO leaders, journalists, experts and academicians from her Bremen constituency. The Coalition members briefed the Bremen delegation about the situation with forced child labour in Uzbekistan and the persecution of those human rights defenders and journalists who have tried to call attention to this issue.

Ms. Beck said that she has been working with Uzbekistan for a number of years and that last year alone she had travelled there four times. She said that the situation in Uzbek cotton industry has been on her agenda for a long time, particularly after seeing the Aral Sea after flying over it in an airplane. She welcomed the idea of the Coalition's Bremen roundtable and expressed her hope that the campaign will be successful.

Although the members of the Bremen delegation expressed their sympathy with the fate of the millions of Uzbek children who are forced to work on cotton plantations so that Uzbek cotton can reach German retail markets, they made no concrete commitments to help tackle this abuse of children's rights. The Coalition members hope that the German MPs, civil society and mass media, particularly in Bremen, will not ignore the issue of forced child labour, and that they will establish a

dialogue on this matter with German importers of Uzbek cotton.

The list of Bremen delegation:

Marieluise Beck (member of Bundestag)

Gertraud Gauer-Süß of the BIZ (Bremer information center on human rights and development of Bremen)

Annegret Ergenzinger, Kampagne für saubere Kleidung

Ellen Best, Bremen court judge and expert on Uzbekistan.

Jochen Tholen, University of Bremen, Institut Arbeit und Wirtschaft IAW

The Uzbekistan delegation:

Nadejda Atayeva (Association “Human Rights in Central Asia,” France)

Alisher Ilkhamov (SOAS, UK)

Ismail Dadadjanov (Democratic Forum of Uzbekistan)

The Uzbek team was also accompanied by Coalition member Mr Bernhard Clasen (Internationale Arbeitsgruppe für Friedensarbeit, gemeinnützig, Germany).

OTHER UPDATES

School children are again sent to cotton plantations for weeding

Member organizations of the Coalition inside Uzbekistan report that school children are already starting to work in the cotton fields, one month before the end of the academic year, on the order of local administrations in several districts of Dzhizzak region. For example, two secondary schools, №26 and №27, were closed for spring agricultural work in Gallaaral district.

Coalition Against Forced Child Labour in Uzbekistan joins forces with the Alliance 2015

Alliance 2015, a network of European development organizations which among other activities runs the global **Stop Child Labour Campaign**, had joined in partnership with the Coalition Against Forced Child Labour in Uzbekistan.

Alliance 2015 is conducting an EU round table in Brussels on May 13, 2008 on the topic, “Corporate Social Responsibility: What the European Union should do.” The background documentation for the the roundtable includes the demands of the Coalition to revoke GSP tariff preferences status for Uzbekistan.

Alliance 2015 was formed in 2000 by six European NGOs focused on development: Welthungerhilfe (Germany), Hivos (the Netherlands), People In Need (Czech Republic),

IBIS (Denmark), CESVI (Iceland) and Concern (Ireland).

For more information about Alliance please visit www.alliance2015.org.

C&A say "no" to Uzbek cotton

The apparel retailer C&A, one of Europe's largest clothing retailers with approximately 1000 outlets across the region, has made a public statement regarding its position on Uzbek cotton.

C&A has stated, "For all C&A suppliers the C&A Code of Conduct is binding. It strictly states that child labour is unacceptable for C&A. Already in December 2007 C&A obliged all of its global suppliers in written form not to use cotton fibre from Uzbekistan in the manufacturing of C&A products. Furthermore, C&A has requested all suppliers worldwide to clearly state the origin for cotton fibre which is used within any C&A merchandise." (April 4, 2008).

Since the start of 2008 a number of retailers – including Tesco, Marks & Spencer, Debenhams and Matalan – have announced bans on cotton sourced from Uzbekistan as long as abuses of child labour continue in the cotton industry of Uzbekistan.

(See more at <http://www.ejfoundation.org/page499.html>)

From archive materials: Accidents and death cases during the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan

A handful of cases of the death and injury of children who were being forced to work in the

cotton fields have been reported by human rights activists, whose names are not disclosed here for their safety reason.

In 2004, in Kitab district of Kashkadarya region, 30 schoolchildren were injured while being transported to cotton fields after they fell off a truck as the result of an accident.

A similar incident happened in 2005 in Samarqand region.

In 2006, in Pop district of Namangan region, one small child who had been put in charge of cooking food in a huge boiling pot accidentally fell into the pot. As a result, 80 percent of his body was burned. In order to prevent the incident from becoming public, the district governor ordered that the student be locked in a small medical facility until the end of the cotton season. Since no medications were available, the child was fed a steady diet of painkillers and drugs to ease his pain. At the end of the cotton season, his parents were finally allowed to take him to the hospital. However, by the time that he was delivered to a proper hospital, his health had deteriorated due to the lack of proper treatment, and he died. Despite the appeals and complaints on behalf of the family to the Prosecutor Office, demanding that it investigate the responsible officials in the Pop district, nothing has been done.

BBC report on forced child labour is the Uzbek cotton fields is nominated for two journalism awards

A report carried by the BBC's Newsnight about forced child labour in the Uzbek cotton industry has been nominated for two media awards.

One of the producers of the report about Uzbek children who are forced by the authorities to spend more than two months a year picking cotton instead of studies said that the report got nominations for two prestigious media awards this year.

The first award is Canada's Banff world television awards and the other is Britain's One World awards.

The report, filmed in Uzbekistan in the early autumn in 2007 on a hidden camera by Insight News TV studio, was shown on the BBC's Newsnight current affairs programme in late October 2007.

Shots with children picking cotton under the supervision of their teachers, a police car escorting a convoy of buses taking them to cotton fields and, finally, children themselves speaking about teachers forcing them to pick cotton – all this touched everyone who watched this report.

The Uzbek embassy in the UK reacted immediately and angrily to the report: it wrote to the BBC that everything shown in the report was a lie. Many major European producers of clothes said that they would consider a ban on the use of Uzbek cotton in their products. Uzbekistan's partners who represent the cotton business of the Uzbek authorities abroad were in the worst situation.

The nomination of the report about child labour in the Uzbek cotton industry will attract greater attention in the world to this big problem.

Uznews.net, 25.04.08,

http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=ru&sub=hot&cid=16&nid=4834

The government of Uzbekistan responds to the Campaign Against Forced Child Labour

On April 12, 2008, the Uzbek Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population issued a press statement dismissing the issue of forced child labour in the country. It accused Uzbek and international NGOs of bias and asserted that Uzbekistan has a sufficient legal base for child protection. We reprint below the statement of the Uzbek government as well as the official response of the Coalition.

CLARIFICATIONS BY THE MINISTRY OF LABOUR AND SOCIAL PROTECTION OF POPULATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN WITH REGARD TO ALLEGATIONS ON "FORCED CHILD LABOUR IN UZBEKISTAN"

Recently some biased non-governmental organizations such as Environmental Justice Foundation (United Kingdom), Association for Human Rights in Central Asia (France), International Working Group on Peace Protection (Germany) as well as some foreign mass-media, in particular, the Swedish TV and BBC, have been

disseminating false and fabricated allegations about “mass use of forced child labour in the agriculture of Uzbekistan”.

Exaggeration of this false information is a part of dishonest and unfair competition in the market of cotton producers. It pursues the aim to lower the rating and price for Uzbek cotton, which today is one of the most competitive in the world, and by that to slow down economic growth of Uzbekistan.

Aiming to counteract the untrue insinuations and fabrications concerning the use of child labour, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population of Uzbekistan clarifies:

I. Regarding the legal basis of inadmissibility of forced child labour in Uzbekistan.

1. The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan prohibits any form of use of forced labour. It constitutes legal basis for protection of citizens from exploitation, discrimination and compulsions (Article 37).

2. The Republic of Uzbekistan is one of the few countries of the world that joined practically all international legal acts concerning prevention of forced labour and use of child labour, in particular:

On forced and compulsory labour (N29) (ratified in August, 1997);

On abolition of forced labour (N105) (ratified in August, 1997);

On discrimination in the field of labour and employment (N111) (ratified in August, 1997);

On minimum age for acceptance for employment (N138) (ratified in March, 2008);

On prohibition and immediate measures for extermination of the worst forms of child labour (N182) (ratified in March, 2008).

3. According to the Law of Republic of Uzbekistan «On guarantees of rights of a child», adopted in 2007, a person younger than 18 years of age is considered to be a child. The right to employment is exercised from 16 years, and in some cases (with the consent of parents and during the time free from study) - from 14 years. At the same time the state guarantees the labour right for persons younger than 18 years by providing necessary conditions for overlapping the work with compulsory education (Art.20 of the Law).

These provisions are reflected also in the Labour code of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Article 7) and are fully

in accordance with the international legal acts on protection of children's rights, in particular, “UN Convention on the rights of child” (1989).

4. State institutions of labour inspections operate in Uzbekistan as envisaged in the ILO Labour inspection Convention №81, including, the State Legal Inspection of Labour and the State Inspection of Labour Protection under the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. The functions and duties of these inspections include prevention of illegal use of child labour.

Thus, the reliable legislative basis of protecting the rights of children in the field of labour is created in Uzbekistan.

II. Concerning the use of child labour in agricultural work, including cotton collection.

1. As a result of fundamental reform of agriculture in Uzbekistan the large agricultural manufacturers were abolished by their transformation into small private family farms (in 2005-2007 practically entire cotton crop was produced by farms), a form of labour which is based on participation of farmer's family members.

2. It is necessary to consider the participation of children under 18 in the work of farms which are family enterprises as a labour in the family enterprise outside the school hours, i.e. an activity to help family members. In particular according to the ILO Convention on the age for admission of children to employment in agriculture №10 and also the Convention on the age for admission of children to non-industrial employment №60, the minimum age of employment in non-industrial enterprises (including agricultural) of the entrepreneur's family members is not limited by the minimum age frameworks.

The practice of involving the children into economical activity of family enterprises, first of all, of agricultural orientation, exists almost in all countries. For example, in USA about 7% of all employed persons in farms are individuals between the age of 14 and 17.

3. The generally recognized family values and traditions of Uzbek society assume and predetermine participation of elder children in creating the family well-being. The society supports and welcomes in every possible way the labour education of children by involving them to render adequate help to elders. This feature of mentality of people of Uzbekistan is an important factor of social and economical development of the country and formation of civil society.

4. The serious participants of world cotton market demonstrate direct non-acceptance of unreasonable charges on “mass use of child labour in the cotton industry of the Republic of Uzbekistan”.

Mr. T. Townsend, the Executive Director of the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC), made a statement, in which he particularly noted that «The majority of representatives of the cotton business, including myself, ignore such accusations, because they are at most exaggerated or absurd...». «I assume that the cotton industry of Uzbekistan can be proud of

its contribution to enhancing the lives and well-being of the people». This statement has been conveyed on behalf of the ICAC to the world's largest cotton associations and stock exchanges.

The similar position is held by the International Cotton Association, the Bremen Cotton Stock Exchange, the Agency «Cotton Outlook» and other authoritative participants of the cotton business.

Thus, at present in Uzbekistan there are no economic and social preconditions for the mass forced use of child labour in agricultural work, including in cotton collection.

COALITION'S RESPONSE TO THE UZBEK MINISTRY OF LABOUR AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Press release, issued on April 21, 2008

Uzbekistan's **Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population** has recently issued a statement titled “**Clarifications with regard to allegations on ‘Forced Child Labour in Uzbekistan’**” in which it accuses the Coalition Against Forced Child Labour in Uzbekistan, the Environmental Justice Foundation and the international media of “disseminating false and fabricated allegations about mass use of child labour in the agriculture of Uzbekistan.”

As we have already stated in our previous documents, forced child labour in Uzbekistan is not a limited or occasional phenomenon: It is widespread and orchestrated by the state. Uzbekistan is the only country in Central Asia that exploits child labour on such a mass scale. (For previous information on this issue please see <http://www.uzbekchildlabour.org/en/>.)

During the 2007 cotton harvest Uzbek activists conducted an exhaustive survey in the Surkhandarya and Kashkadarya regions of Uzbekistan. The survey revealed that in these two provinces alone approximately 250,000 children were forced to abandon school and sent to pick cotton. We are receiving reports that **at this very moment schoolchildren from rural areas are again being sent for spring agricultural work**, one month prior to the end of academic year.

The Ministry alleges that “false information” being spread is a part of “dishonest and unfair competition in the market of cotton producers” and is aimed at slowing down economic growth in Uzbekistan. Such claims from the Ministry sound more like old Soviet conspiratorial accusations

about the “evil forces of capitalism,” rather than an intention to honestly address the problem of forced child labour in the cotton industry in the only way it can be addressed: by ending it.

To state the obvious, no member of or participant in the Coalition Against Forced Child Labour in Uzbekistan has any connection with Uzbekistan's competitors in the world cotton market. Our group consists of representatives of Uzbek civil society as well as international non-governmental organizations and unaffiliated concerned citizens and consumers.

The Ministry has cited a number of national laws and ILO conventions on children's rights that have been adopted and ratified by Uzbekistan. However, there is no rule of law in Uzbekistan, and these laws, although they may exist on paper, are being systematically violated by the authorities themselves. We urge the Uzbek government to implement its own laws and international commitments.

As another part of its attack against our Coalition, the Ministry refers to the position of the **International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC)**, claiming that the ICAC leadership has dismissed our statements on the issue of forced child labour in Uzbekistan. The Ministry is most likely unaware of the recent developments, which have seen the establishment of constructive communication and dialogue between ICAC on the one hand, and the Coalition Against Forced Child Labour in Uzbekistan on the other. In the context of this dialogue, ICAC has not dismissed our claims; on the contrary they are taking them very seriously, as far as we can judge.

The Coalition held a **Roundtable on 3 April 2008 on the issue of forced child labour in Uzbekistan** in Bremen, Germany, in parallel with the 29th International Cotton Conference, which was taking

place in that same city. The roundtable was attended by representatives of following organizations and mass media:

- European Commission
- Council of Europe
- International Cotton Advisory Committee
- Environmental Justice Foundation
- Human Rights Watch
- International Crisis Group
- Eurasian Transition Group
- Association “Human Rights in Central Asia”
- Uzbekistan Initiative – London
- Internationale Arbeitsgruppe für Friedensarbeit, gemeinnützig
- Open Society Institute
- Deutsche Welle
- Radio Free Europe/Liberty
- Various freelance journalists

The roundtable participants were presented with evidence of the practice of forced child labour in Uzbekistan, and discussed what steps the international community could and should take in order to persuade the government of Uzbekistan to end this cruel, semi-feudal practice.

On 4 April 2008 the Coalition held a separate meeting with the representatives of the cotton industry at the Bremen Cotton Exchange. The meeting was attended by Uzbek activists, the Environmental Justice Foundation, and At Stake Advisors, as well as representatives of ICAC, the Bremen Cotton Exchange (*Bremen Baumwollborse*), the Gdynia Cotton Association, and members of the ICAC Expert Panel on Social Environmental and Economic Performance.

At this meeting, representatives of ICAC spoke about their plans to communicate with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) about

conducting a **survey during the harvest season in Uzbekistan** with the goal of double-checking the validity of accumulated evidence about forced child labor that has been presented by Uzbek activists. We noted that ICAC did not accuse Uzbek activists for making ungrounded allegations; in contrary, ICAC representatives expressed their determination to take the appropriate steps to protect the reputation of the international cotton industry, what can be done only by persuading the government of Uzbekistan to stop sending children to cotton plantations.

The Coalition has greeted with satisfaction the idea of conducting one more survey research that would be sponsored and backed by UNICEF, the ILO and ICAC. At the same time we must be very clear: **The credibility of such a survey would be undermined if the government of Uzbekistan** were able to impose its control or preferences over the survey’s design and implementation in any way.

The Coalition would like to draw the attention of the government of Uzbekistan to the **increasing isolation of Uzbek cotton from international markets**. The movement for the abolition of forced child labor in Uzbekistan has been joined by a growing number of European and global retailers, as well as by trade unions in Europe. Some recent reports suggest that the creation of a new cotton trade facility in Dubai for Uzbek cotton—hastily announced by the Uzbek authorities—may in practice fail to materialize.

The government of Uzbekistan must now take into account the consequences for the Uzbek cotton industry of continuing the practice of forced child labor. The preservation of this semi-feudal practice is obviously damaging to the interests of the Uzbek population, most of all its children, as it has always been. And it is damaging to the productivity of cotton industry. Now to these factors the Uzbek government should also take into consideration the growing reality, which is that Uzbekistan—unless it completely and immediately ends the practice forced child labor—is rapidly heading toward an international boycott of Uzbek cotton.

TRUE VALUE OF THE RATIFICATION BY UZBEKISTAN OF ILO CONVENTIONS ON CHILD LABOUR

This spring, Uzbekistan ratified two ILO

conventions on child labour. On March 28, the Uzbek parliament ratified the ILO Convention on Minimal Age of Employment (1973); then on April 8, it ratified the Convention on Prohibition and Immediate Action for Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999).

By ratifying these conventions, Uzbekistan

undertook an obligation under international law to take immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children. (This language is specified by Article 1 and Article 3 of the Convention on Prohibition and Immediate Action for Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour.)

Under the Minimal Age convention, the minimum age for workers shall not be less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling; and in any case it shall not be less than 15 years. Nevertheless an ILO member whose economy and educational facilities are insufficiently developed may, after consultation with organizations representing the employers and workers concerned, initially specify a minimum age of 14 years.

The Coalition welcomes ratification of these Conventions. However, we would like to point out that Uzbek national legislation has already have provisions related to the minimal age of employment. Uzbekistan has adopted a number of laws addressing Youth Policy, Labour, and Children's Rights. These statutes set limits and restrictions on the use of child labour. By Uzbek law children are only allowed to being working once they have reached the age of 15.

In 1992 and 1997 respectively, Uzbekistan had already signed and ratified two other relevant ILO conventions: No. 29, the Forced Labour Convention (1930), and No. 105, the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (1957). By following these two conventions Uzbekistan would be already obliged to abolish the mass scale practice

of forced child labour going on uninterruptedly since Soviet times. But it didn't happen. All Uzbekistan international commitments on this issue remained on paper only, while in reality the Uzbek authorities kept sending children to cotton plantations.

As an example of the total ignoring by the Uzbek government of its own and international laws serves the fact that right after the ratification the rural school children have been again sent for weeding at cotton fields and their schools have been closed down one month prior to the end of academic year.

The ratification of international conventions and the passage of laws has no effect on the actual situation in Uzbekistan for a very simple reason: The rule of law is nonexistent in Uzbekistan. To see these laws and conventions implemented, the international community should put further pressure on the Uzbek government to start respecting its obligations and to end the use of forced child labour.

The European Union should include the issue of forced child labour in its human rights dialogue with the Uzbek government and demand immediately to stop the compulsory use of child labour.

The UN Committees of Child's Rights should make inquiry to the government of Uzbekistan concerning this semi-feudal practice.

The European cotton importers, textile companies, retailers and investment banks should suspend their deals with Uzbekistan's cotton and textile industries, until they receive verified information that this practice of enslaving children is ended.

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