

# STOP THE TRAFFIK

PEOPLE SHOULDN'T BE BOUGHT & SOLD



## Cotton Picking Forced Child Labour in Uzbekistan

August 2011

Uzbekistan is the world's sixth largest producer of cotton, and the third largest exporter. For decades it has used forced labour of schoolchildren, college and university students to harvest cotton by hand. Each year over one million children as young as nine-years-old are sent out to work in the fields.<sup>1</sup> This practice is organised and controlled by the central government.

Early in each school year the government orders schools to close and school administrators to send children out into the fields where they remain until the cotton harvest is brought in. Children and schools are assigned quotas to fill and the principals of schools that do not meet their quota are threatened with dismissal. The consequences for children who object to taking part or do not work to their teachers' satisfaction are severe, with beatings being commonplace. Teachers have reported principals instructing them to "have no mercy" towards children who do not work hard enough.

*"We're really afraid of getting expelled from school. Every September 2, the first day of school, the Director warns us that if we don't go out to pick cotton we might as well not come back to school. The school administration does everything to create the impression that the schoolchildren themselves are the ones who have decided to go out to the cotton fields. But just try to "voluntarily" not go out to the harvest! We're all forced to obey this unwritten law."*

Boy, ninth grade (14 years old), Kashkadaria province<sup>2</sup>

In 2008 the pressure to meet harvest quotas led to a 17-year old girl hanging herself from a tree on the edge of a cotton field.<sup>3</sup> In this same year 'there were at least five reported deaths of children due to poor safety standards'<sup>4</sup> The 2010 cotton harvest saw school children forced to labour in the fields from the beginning of the harvest in September for up to three months. Once again, the harsh conditions led to the death of at least one child.<sup>5</sup>

There are no days off during the cotton harvest. Children are largely responsible for providing their own food and water, drinking contaminated water from canals and ditches leading to viral hepatitis infections and other diseases. Injuries are also commonplace but no compensation is paid and those who complain are threatened with repercussions. Though the government sets a recommended rate of pay, farmers often underpay the children and school administrators withhold a portion of the pay with impunity. The farmers are forced to sell their cotton to the Uzbekistan Government at a price set by the Government, which is below the world market price. Thus the farmers are unable to hire adult workers to harvest the cotton.

Government officials, police officers and even local prosecutors all pressure parents to make sure their children participate, threatening denial of pensions or social welfare payments; disconnection of electricity, gas and water; arrest; beatings; temporary detention and criminal prosecution. Faced with this pressure and threats to plough under their garden plots, (a critical means of subsistence for rural families) parents feel "we can't say anything". In 2010 teachers were verbally and physically abused by government officials and villages had their electricity supply cut off.<sup>6</sup>

*"This year the chairman of the collective farm insisted that I, and my daughter-in-law and my remaining children, go out to pick cotton otherwise he would take our plot away [garden plot used to grow fruits and vegetables]. The chairman said that if we don't go out, I'll have to pay one hundred thousand sum (approximately US\$70- equivalent to more than three average monthly wages). When I said there was no way I could pay that kind of money, he started to threaten that in that case we wouldn't get the welfare payment. I don't know where to turn to complain."*

Mother of six children, Boiavut district<sup>7</sup>

### International campaign

In 2004 local activists started to call for the world to boycott cotton harvested in Uzbekistan until the use of forced child labour was ended. International brands and retailers including Tesco, Walmart, Levi Strauss, Gap, Limited Brands, NIKE and Marks and Spencer agreed to ban Uzbek cotton from their supply chains

## Australian Campaign

STOP THE TRAFFIK has written to Target, Kmart and Cotton On requesting that these retailers ensure that Uzbekistan cotton is not used in products which they sell. Kmart have indicated that they, “do not support the use of Uzbekistan cotton in the production of Kmart merchandise. In the event that Uzbekistan cotton is detected, we will take all necessary steps to ensure its use is stopped immediately.” Disappointingly, this commitment does not extend to an investigation of the source of cotton in products which Kmart sells. Target had discussions with STOP THE TRAFFIK Australia but has not made any formal commitment to do anything. Cotton On have failed to respond to STOP THE TRAFFIK’S letters.

Kmart and Target have Ethical Sourcing Codes which commit to ‘the safe and ethical manufacture and supply of goods and services’. This includes only doing business with vendors who do not use child labour and do not use forced, bonded or involuntary labour. Cotton On’s Code of Conduct outlines trading principles which include not hiring underage workers and not using forced labour or disciplinary practices.

### What you can do

Write polite and respectful letters to:

Guy Russo	Launa Inman	Nigel Austin
Managing Director	Managing Director	Group Director
Kmart	Target Australia Pty Ltd	Cotton On
690 Springvale Road	8-14 Thompson Road	14 Shepherd Court
Mulgrave VIC 3170	North Geelong, Victoria, 3215	North Geelong, Victoria, 3215

Points to make in your letter to Kmart:

- Welcome the fact that Kmart’s Ethical Sourcing Code includes a commitment to only do business with vendors who do not use child labour and do not use forced, bonded or involuntary labour.
- Congratulate Kmart on its undertaking to cease the use of Uzbekistan cotton where it is detected.
- Urge Kmart to go further and give you a guarantee to undertake an audit of cotton suppliers to ensure no cotton from Uzbekistan is used in products which Kmart sells.

Points to make in your letter to Target:

- Welcome the fact that Target’s Ethical Sourcing Code includes a commitment to only do business with vendors who do not use child labour and do not use forced, bonded or involuntary labour.
- Ask Target to make a public commitment not to sell products that contain cotton from Uzbekistan until Uzbekistan stops the use of forced child labour in the cotton harvest.
- Urge Target to give you a guarantee that it will undertake an audit of its cotton suppliers to ensure no cotton from Uzbekistan is used in products which Target sells.

Points to make in your letter to Cotton On:

- Welcome the fact that Cotton On’s Code of Conduct includes a commitment to not hire underage workers and to not use forced labour or disciplinary practices.
- Ask Cotton On to make a public commitment not to sell products that contain cotton from Uzbekistan until Uzbekistan stops the use of forced child labour in the cotton harvest.
- Urge Cotton On to give you a guarantee that it will undertake an audit of its cotton suppliers to ensure no cotton from Uzbekistan is used in products which Target sells.

### Acknowledgement

Information for this action was taken from reports by the International Labor Rights Forum, in addition to sources identified below.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sourcingnetwork.org/cotton/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.antislavery.org/english/campaigns/cottoncrimes/forced\\_labour\\_in\\_uzbekistan\\_background.aspx](http://www.antislavery.org/english/campaigns/cottoncrimes/forced_labour_in_uzbekistan_background.aspx)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.laborrights.org/stop-child-forced-labor/cotton-campaign/uzbekistan/news/12420>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.antislavery.org/english/campaigns/cottoncrimes/forced\\_labour\\_in\\_uzbekistan\\_background.aspx](http://www.antislavery.org/english/campaigns/cottoncrimes/forced_labour_in_uzbekistan_background.aspx)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.uznews.net/news\\_single.php?lng=en&sub=hot&cid=3&nid=15248](http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=en&sub=hot&cid=3&nid=15248)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.antislavery.org/english/campaigns/cottoncrimes/forced\\_labour\\_in\\_uzbekistan\\_background.aspx](http://www.antislavery.org/english/campaigns/cottoncrimes/forced_labour_in_uzbekistan_background.aspx)