

Saturday, January 19, 2008

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Uzbekistan: Cotton Industry Targeted By Child-Labor Activists

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Uzbeks harvesting 'white gold'
(AFP)

In an open letter on January 17, some 100 Uzbek dissidents and activists abroad and 40 in the country say the forced use of child labor in the Uzbek cotton industry has become a "deliberate state policy" aimed at "acquiring extra

profits."

Child labor has existed since the Soviet era in Uzbekistan, the world's third-largest cotton exporter. But the letter, the second such appeal by Uzbek activists in as many months, says that in recent years forced child labor has spread on a "mass scale," and that working conditions for thousands of minors who toil in Uzbek fields have worsened.

One of the letter's signatories is Nadejda Atayeva, who heads a Paris-based Association on Human Rights in Central Asia.

"As you know, child labor has been used to pick and proceed cotton for many years [in Uzbekistan], and the time came when we decided to raise this problem," says Atayeva, whose group is behind the campaign to boycott Uzbek cotton. "We wrote the petition to the international community in order to start debate and address the issue properly because efforts to solve the problem inside the country did not bring any success so far."

Global Attention

Concerns over the use of forced child labor in Uzbekistan began attracting more international attention in October, after the BBC aired a documentary that showed Uzbek children picking cotton for clothing sold in Britain.

The BBC's "Newsnight" program filmed an Uzbek cotton field full of schoolchildren, some as young as 9, hard at work. The documentary showed how children were accompanied by a police escort, which cleared the road for buses and trucks loaded with mattresses to take the kids to cotton fields or back to the barracks. One boy said he was paid just two pence per kilogram -- 40 percent less than officials in the capital, Tashkent, said pickers were paid.

Following the expose, several international companies said they would stop buying Uzbek cotton. Swedish retail giant H&M, Finland's Marimekko, and Estonia's Krenholm were the first. This week, they were joined by Britain's Tesco,