New report shows continued use of forced child labor in Uzbekistan’s cotton industry despite some improvement

A new report released today by the International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF) and anonymous human rights activists shows that while international pressure from retailers and consumers has had some effect in curbing forced child labor in the production of cotton in Uzbekistan, the practice is still pervasive.

The report has been released in conjunction with a call to boycott Uzbek cotton from nearly 50 Uzbek human rights activists living around the world. In an open letter (available online here) to international financial institutions and cotton traders, Uzbek activists said the cotton sector needs comprehensive reform to end the forced child labor that helps to line the pockets of the Uzbek political and economic elite.

The new ILRF report documents the following:

- Since gaining independence in 1991, Uzbekistan’s authoritarian government has increased its reliance on forced child labor to harvest cotton. Uzbekistan is the third largest exporter of cotton in the world.

- The Uzbek government closes schools during the cotton harvest and forces children as young as nine to perform dangerous work in the cotton fields.

- Schools were assigned quotas to fulfill, and principals of schools that did not meet the quotas were threatened with dismissal. The consequences for children and families who objected to taking part were severe: beatings were commonplace.

International brands and retailers including Tesco, Walmart, Target, Levi Strauss, Gap, Limited Brands and Marks and Spencer have agreed to ban Uzbek cotton from their supply chains until the practice of forced child labor is ended.

Bama Athreya, Executive Director of the International Labor Rights Forum, said, “Despite the international outcry from companies, investors, human rights and labor activists, the practice of forced child labor continues in Uzbekistan’s cotton industry. We call on the Uzbek government to stop these abuses in this year’s cotton harvest. Consumers do not want the sweat of exploited workers in their clothes.”
The full report, “‘We Live Subject to their Orders’: A Three-Province Survey of Forced Child Labor in Uzbekistan’s 2008 Cotton Harvest” can be found online here: http://www.laborrights.org/stop-child-labor/cotton-campaign/uzbekistan/resources/2135.

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The International Labor Rights Forum is an advocacy organization dedicated to achieving just and human treatment for workers worldwide. For more information, please visit www.LaborRights.org.