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## Hard truths about Uzbek cotton

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Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) is chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee and a longtime leader in the fight to end abusive child labor around the globe.

*The strongman regime is making huge profits on the backs of the nation's children while ignoring calls to halt its violations of international labor regulations.*

As youngsters in the United States return to school, children in Uzbekistan will be returning to the fields. For them, it is the autumn cotton harvest. From now through the end of November, instead of attending classes, 2 million Uzbek children ages 6 to 15 will be forced to spend their days picking cotton.

Unlike most instances of forced child labor in agriculture, this mass mobilization is not driven by exploitative plantation owners or desperate families but by the government. Each year during the three-month harvest, Uzbek authorities shut down hundreds of schools, hospitals and public offices. Along with the children, thousands of teachers, doctors and public administrators are forced into the fields. What makes this mass forced labor uniquely pernicious is the fact that it is dictated and directed by the authoritarian Uzbek government and is executed on a scale unmatched anywhere in the world.

Uzbekistan, the world's third-largest exporter of raw cotton, generates about \$1 billion a year by exporting cotton. The government and bosses of state-owned enterprises reap the profits. Children who toil in the fields receive little more than meager meals for their labor.

President Islam Karimov, the strongman leader in Uzbekistan since Soviet times, has not only suppressed democracy, he has maintained his regime's rigid monopoly as the sole purchaser of cotton grown in the country. Uzbek farmers are required to sell their cotton to state trading agencies at less than one-third the world market price. In turn, the government sells the cotton on commodity exchanges at the market price, guaranteeing huge profits.

Consumers and companies in the West prop up this monstrous system by unwittingly purchasing cotton harvested by forced child labor. Supply chain analysts have determined that most Uzbek cotton is sold to countries in South Asia and Eastern Europe. From there, the cotton is processed and turned into garments sold in retail stores in the United States, Canada and Western Europe.

In 2007, a group of nongovernmental organizations and socially responsible investors brought the plight of Uzbekistan's children to the attention of U.S. apparel brands and

retailers. Since then, a remarkable network of retailers, manufacturers, faith-based investors and others has come together to try to persuade the Uzbek government to end its use of forced child labor.