



Uzbeks urged to end child labour

By Jonathan Birchall in New York

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The four biggest groups representing the US retail and clothing industry are calling on Uzbekistan to end the widespread use of child labour in the harvesting of the country's cotton crop.

The groups are urging President Islam Karimov to take "decisive and immediate actions to end the use of forced child labour in the cotton fields" in the world's second-largest cotton exporter.

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The most recent US state department human rights report on Uzbekistan, published in March last year, noted that there was "large-scale compulsory mobilisation of youth and students to help in the fall cotton harvest ... in most rural areas".

Retailers and clothing companies in the US and the UK – including Tesco, Marks & Spencer, Target and Gap – have already taken measures to exclude Uzbek cotton from their merchandise following repeated reports of Uzbek children picking cotton for minimal payments.

In a letter to be delivered on Friday to the Uzbek ambassador in Washington, the National Retail Federation, the Retail Industry Leaders Association, the American Apparel and Footwear Association and the Association of Importers of Textiles and Apparel, say that use of child labour is "totally unacceptable", and note that retailers have told their suppliers to avoid Uzbek cotton.

The US industry initiative coincides with calls from a coalition of 60 US ethical investment funds, faith-based investors and NGOs for Uzbekistan to start working with the International Labour Organisation on a programme to eradicate the use of child labour.

Patricia Jurewicz, of the As You Sow Foundation, which co-ordinated the non-government organisation and investor coalition, said the groups' letter "sends a clear message that forcing children to pick cotton must end immediately".

Child labour is banned under Uzbekistan's constitution, and the government has in the past argued that child workers volunteer to help with the harvest.

Uzbekistan produces more than 800,000 tonnes of cotton annually, worth more than £500m. About a third is used in Europe, after being processed elsewhere in Asia.

Three state-owned conglomerates buy harvested cotton at prices fixed by the state, allowing the government to net the difference with the global price for the commodity.

President Karimov's autocratic regime has suppressed political dissent in the country. In 2005, security forces opened fire on protesters in the eastern city of Andijan, killing hundreds of people.

Robert Templer, Asia director of the International Crisis Group, noted that Uzbekistan's cotton revenues provided an important source of funds for the country's security forces Uzbek state. "The cotton revenues play an important role in funding the whole system of repression in Uzbekistan," he said.

The pressure from the retail brands over the issue represents an extension of the industry's efforts to monitor conditions in suppliers' factories to the sourcing of raw materials.

Steve Trent, director of the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), which has led a campaign on the issue in Europe, said retailers had overcome initial reservations about their ability to trace the source of the cotton used by their suppliers, and had found it relatively straightforward.

Uzbekistan said this spring it will start selling its future cotton crop through the Dubai commodities exchange rather than to dealers working in Uzbekistan, in a move that Mr Trent says is apparently aimed at disguising the source of its cotton. However, he noted that the use of serial numbers on cotton bales would still enable retailers to trace the source of the cotton used by their suppliers if they chose.

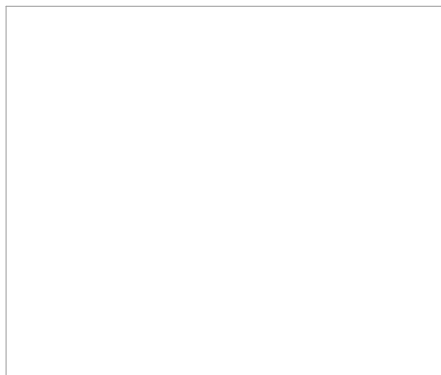
Bennett Freeman, head of social research and policy at Calvert Investments, one of the members of the coalition, said the extent of government involvement in enforcing child labour in the country was "almost unique".

"What makes this a special case is not only the massive scale of state-enforced child labour ...but how directly that regime is facilitating these practices," he said.

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