

BSCI GUIDANCE ON UZBEK COTTON

October 2012

About Uzbek Cotton¹

Uzbekistan is the only country where children are organized and forced by the government to harvest cotton which earns the Uzbek government over one billion dollars annually. The cotton sector in Uzbekistan is strictly managed by the central government in Tashkent who imposes cotton production quotas on all farmers and local governments and determines procurement prices. Each autumn, all school children aged 10 to 15 (except those in schools in the capital and other major cities), High-school (Lyceum), college, and university students are ordered by school administrators to harvest cotton. In total, compulsory work in agriculture requires school children to miss as many as 3-4 months of study each year.

Uzbekistan has signed and ratified ILO conventions: No 29 (the 1930 Forced Labour Convention) and No. 105 (The 1957 Abolition of Forced Labour Convention) in the 1990s. In 2008, 2 other important ILO conventions, No. 138 (Minimum Age Convention, 1973), and No.182 (Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999) were ratified by the Uzbek Parliament. Despite this and international pressure the Uzbekistan government has failed to fulfill their obligations and recommendations from ILO.

Bangladesh and China are the main importers of Uzbek cotton, accounting for an estimated 70% of exports². However, after being processed in Asia into textile and garments, Uzbek cotton continues to find its way into Western markets. Some Western countries continue to directly purchase Uzbek cotton fiber.

Traceability in the supply chain is at the heart of the Uzbek cotton issue. Any company involved in manufacturing and/or retailing of products containing cotton and produced in a number of the world's key manufacturing markets, may be exposed to Uzbek cotton.

The BSCI Approach

- In April 2010, BSCI participated in the multi-stakeholder meeting '*Ending Forced Child Labour in Uzbekistan's Cotton Sector*' and as a result co-signed a letter to the Ambassador of Uzbekistan in Brussels, urging the Uzbek government to welcome the ILO observer mission on Uzbek territory to assess the implementation of the ratified Convention 138 and 182 on Child Labour and on Worst Forms of Child Labour.
- In November 2010, BSCI co-signed another letter to the Deputy Director General of the ILO stressing the importance of monitoring the implementation of the above mentioned

¹ For more detailed information on the issue see

<http://www.sourcingnetwork.org/storage/FromTheFieldReport.pdf>

² Also significant are Turkey, Germany, South Korea, Iran, Pakistan, UAE, Russia, and Italy.

Conventions in Uzbekistan and urging them to take action following the refusal of the Uzbek government to welcome the ILO observer mission.

- In April 2011, BSCI co-signed a letter to EU Commissioner for Trade, Karel De Gucht, requesting an investigation under the General System of Preferences, which allows for the EC to remove trade preferences from trading partners in case of serious and systematic violations of convention laid out in the annex of the GSP Regulation.
- In July this year, BSCI co-signed a letter to the European Union Special Representative for Central Asia inviting her to generate pressure on the Uzbek government to invite the ILO observer mission during the 2012 harvest period.

Latest developments

The Cotton Campaign reported that in addition to forced child labour, the Uzbek government is now also forcing adults to work in cotton fields during the harvest time. According to reports from non-governmental organisations working in Uzbekistan as well as academic studies in 2011, provincial government offices also mobilised adults - including employees of private companies - to meet the harvest quota.

Given the Uzbek government's lack of willingness to accept the ILO to monitor the cotton harvest starting in September 2012, and the disappointing results from engagement with governments and ILO, the Cotton Campaign has now started approaching business-led organisations (such as the American Apparel and Footwear Association and BSCI) to encourage their members to proactively implement the pledge. After discussion in the BSCI Steering Committee, BSCI recommends the following actions mentioned below to its participating companies:

Recommendations to BSCI Participants

- **Signing the Company Pledge** developed by the Cotton Campaign (click [here](#) to access), which states that:
 - the company is aware of the problem,
 - takes a collaborative approach and
 - commits to not knowingly source cotton from Uzbekistan, until an independent ILO mission has verified the elimination of the practice.
 - To access the list of current signatories, <http://www.sourcingnetwork.org/the-cotton-pledge/>
 - avoid doing business with companies sourcing directly from Uzbekistan OR
 - contact those companies to raise concerns about the situation and ask for information on what is being done to address the issue
 - those BSCI participants who source textile products especially from Bangladesh and China are encouraged to engage with their suppliers by asking them to provide credible country of origin information for the cotton they buy
 - share their policy/work done on traceability and Uzbekistan cotton

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