



INTERNATIONAL COTTON ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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November 30, 2007

Civil Society Activists of Uzbekistan

Dear Activists,

Thank you for ensuring that the Secretariat of the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC) received a copy of your call for a boycott of Uzbek cotton. We take your allegations of forced child labor and chemical exposure seriously.

The ICAC Secretariat is knowledgeable about actual cotton production practices in Uzbekistan. One member of the Secretariat received a Ph.D. in plant breeding from the Agricultural Institute of Tashkent in 1980 and another member worked for the Soviet state trading agency dealing with cotton and other fibers during the 1980s. Members of the Secretariat have traveled to Uzbekistan frequently since the Government joined the ICAC after independence. Cotton contributes to rising incomes, greater wealth and improved social conditions for an estimated 350 million people in producing countries, and I am very willing to interact with those engaged in efforts to improve the cotton industry.

The allegations of forced child labor in cotton production in Uzbekistan have been circulating for many years. Most in the cotton industry, including myself, have shrugged off these allegations because they have seemed exaggerated at best, and perhaps even absurd. However, this issue has now risen to a level of public awareness that merits a reasoned response. If children are being forced into unhealthy or inappropriate labor conditions related to cotton production, I am sure that the Government of Uzbekistan is anxious to ensure that such practices are discontinued.

I hope that you will take a moment to realize that your petition calling for a boycott seems to include numerous factual errors. For example, your petition alleges that children "inhale dust, saturated with the residues of chemicals, pesticides and defoliants, abundantly used in the cotton fields before the collection of cotton." Defoliants are not used in Uzbekistan at any time in the production process (defoliants are used only in countries where cotton is machine harvested). Pesticide use in Uzbekistan is among the lowest in the world because of low pest pressure owing to climatic conditions and because Uzbekistan is a world leader in the development and use of biological pest control systems. All chemicals used in cotton production are fully biodegradable, and chemical use in cotton production is discontinued several weeks prior to harvest (once plants mature, bolls open and lint is exposed, no additional plant protection measures are necessary). Consequently, there are no chemical residues in cotton fields or on cotton plants by the time workers enter fields to harvest.

The petition also alleges that remuneration for child labor is 12 times lower than world prices. This seems to indicate a misunderstanding of the marketing system. Most farms in Uzbekistan are privately owned, and the Government of Uzbekistan buys seed cotton from farmers and sells lint domestically and on the world market. Farmers are paying workers to harvest crops, and harvest expenses are only one component of total production costs. Based on a worldwide survey of the costs of production conducted by the Secretariat, harvesting costs average 9% of total cotton production costs. The world average includes cotton harvested by machine, which is above hand harvesting costs. Accordingly, remuneration paid to workers in Uzbekistan for cotton harvesting is about equal to the world average.

Other allegations contained in your petition seem to be rather difficult to accept, including the charge that schools close for no less than two months, that children work at least 8 hours a day, and that child labor provides no less than half of the cotton produced in Uzbekistan. Given the clear factual errors regarding chemical exposure and marketing practices, one might wonder whether additional errors have been made. I would ask for the specific references or sources upon which your allegations are based.

Despite the factual errors included in the call for a boycott, the allegations themselves are damaging to the image of the cotton industry and the Republic of Uzbekistan. If allowed to go unanswered, these allegations will damage consumer perceptions of the cotton industry resulting in lower incomes to all cotton producers. It is self evident that a boycott of Uzbek cotton in international markets is highly impractical because of the nature of commodity markets. Nevertheless, objective responses to the allegations are necessary.

The Secretariat of the ICAC is gathering objective information about labor and chemical use in cotton production, including cotton production in Uzbekistan. We will make this information available to member governments of the ICAC, intergovernmental organizations and others interested in the cotton industry. In addition, the ICAC created an Expert Panel on Social, Environmental and Economic Performance of Cotton Production (SEEP) earlier this year. Part of the mandate of SEEP is to gather information about labor costs and labor practices in the cotton industry. The SEEP Panel will be collecting information during 2008, and a report to the 67th Plenary Meeting of the ICAC in November 2008 in Burkina Faso is expected.

I have recommended to the Government of Uzbekistan that your call for UNICEF and the ILO to provide the international community with an "objective and honest report" on the issue of forced child labor in cotton production in Uzbekistan should be accepted enthusiastically and that every courtesy and assistance to investigators be provided. I think that the cotton industry of Uzbekistan can be proud of its contributions to improved living standards and rising incomes, and I have strongly urged the Government of Uzbekistan to invite UNICEF and/or the ILO to conduct such a study. I can assure that the ICAC Secretariat and the Expert Panel on SEEP will assist other international organizations in the conduct of such a study, and we would look forward to cooperating on such a project. Such a study would be consistent with the objectives of the ICAC to disseminate information about cotton production practices with recommendations for best practices.

In addition, I urge representatives of the Civil Society Activists from Uzbekistan to attend cotton industry events to learn more about this excellent industry and gain greater insights into the operations of individual cotton companies.

Many cotton industry conferences are held in various venues each year. For example, the 29th International Cotton Conference Bremen will be held in Bremen, Germany during April 2-5, 2008. Approximately 700 persons from the world cotton industry will be in attendance. The International Cotton Association in Liverpool, UK will conduct an annual conference and dinner during October 1-3, 2008. This meeting attracts about 800 persons from around the world each year and would be an excellent opportunity to interact with cotton interests in the UK and elsewhere. Of course, the 67th Plenary Meeting of the ICAC will be held during November 17-21, 2008 in Burkina Faso, and topics related to the agenda of SEEP will be discussed. I hope that Civil Society Activists of Uzbekistan can be represented at each of these meetings to take advantage of opportunities to gain information about the world cotton industry.

I look forward to continued interaction and hope that your members will avail themselves of every opportunity to gain a greater understanding of cotton production practices and the role of cotton in the economies of developing countries.

Sincerely,



Terry P. Townsend
Executive Director

Cc: Ms. Cecilia Marincioni, Chair of the Standing Committee of ICAC
Mr. Zbigniew Roskwitalski, Executive Vice President, Gdynia Cotton Association
Mr. Jan Wellmann, Executive Director, Bremen Baumwollbörse
Mr. John Beck, Director General, International Cotton Association