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Viewpoints: Child labor: As close as the shirt on your back

By Daniel Fibiger

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Each fall, as parents in the United States buy their children back-to-school clothing, the government of Uzbekistan shuts down schools and corrals more than 1 million children to work in the country's cotton fields.

June 12 was the World Day Against Child Labor, and while forced child labor may seem a faraway problem, it is often as close as the clothes we're wearing.

In Uzbekistan – the world's second-largest cotton exporter – the government forces children to work more than 12-hour days, every day, from September to December. The children are assigned daily quotas of 40 to 80 pounds of cotton and will be lucky to receive 40 to 50 cents a day, even though 80 pounds of Uzbek cotton can currently fetch more than \$75 dollars on the open market. Many children will receive nothing at all. Not a bad rate of return for the custodians of this malignant system.

This state-sanctioned servitude, a remnant of the Soviet era, earns the Uzbek government more than \$1 billion annually – profits that are believed to line the pockets of high-ranking government officials.

The government rigidly controls the price of farmers' seeds, fertilizer and other inputs, dictates the purchasing price of the harvested cotton, and is the sole purchaser and seller of the crop. The raw cotton then enters a complex supply chain that leads to countries such as Bangladesh and China, where it is eventually made into clothes and shipped to the United States and Europe.

The public is beginning to take notice. In an effort to end Uzbekistan's forced child labor program, nongovernmental organizations and socially responsible investors have called upon Western apparel brands and retailers to avoid sourcing cotton from Uzbekistan until this practice stops. Since 2007, many of the world's largest apparel companies have joined this effort, ranging from San Francisco's Gap Inc. and Levi Strauss & Co., to European brands Marks & Spencer and Tesco.

Many companies have implemented policies banning Uzbek cotton from their supply chains and have adopted supply chain traceability practices to enforce these policies. This is no easy task, considering the cotton supply chain is one of the world's most opaque and circuitous. Other companies, in tandem with NGOs, are working through diplomatic channels, encouraging the governments of the United States and several European countries to raise the issue bilaterally.

The broad network of NGOs, companies, investors, trade unions, and industry associations working on this issue have asked the government of Uzbekistan to invite assistance from the International Labor Organization to help shift the country's reliance on child laborers to paid, adult workers.

At the International Labor Organization's annual meeting in Geneva this month, a strong message was delivered to the Uzbek government: take responsibility, work with the labor organization and stop exploiting kids.

While the Uzbek delegation continued to deny it relies on forced child labor to harvest cotton – despite this being a widely documented practice – it surprisingly did not initially object to the labor organization's recommendation to invite a high-level, international observation mission to its 2010 cotton harvest. In this lamentable case, a lack of an outright objection may be a signal of pro-



Daniel Fibiger

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However, it remains to be seen whether the ILO observers will be provided open access and free range of movement. Previous experience suggests the labor organization team's activities may be tightly restricted and controlled once they touch down in Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital.

Ultimately, the decision to use child labor does not rest with the International Labor Organization or any other international body. Though an amenable solution will most likely involve international assistance and public insistence, the Uzbek government must take steps to remediate this oppressive practice on its own.

As consumers, we can incentivize the Uzbek government to constructively engage with the International Labor Organization and move toward utilizing an adult work force.

Next time you shop for clothes, check if the apparel brands and retailers you support have policies on Uzbek cotton. It is both our right and our responsibility to know that our purchasing decisions are not sustaining one of the most egregious human rights violations in the world.

Daniel Fibiger is the cotton program manager at the Responsible Sourcing Network, a project of As You Sow, which addresses human rights violations in the supply chains of consumer products.