

ETHICAL BUYING DEMANDS VIGILANCE

Retailers should be concerned with cotton harvested in Uzbekistan



It's common practice in Uzbekistan for the country's children to toil in fields picking the staple fiber coveted by clothing manufacturers worldwide.

Retailers selling cotton garments or products should know that beginning in early September, and lasting until the end of November, more than two million Uzbek children between the ages of 6 and 18 are forced to spend their days picking raw cotton.

Each harvest season, the Uzbekistan government shuts down not just hundreds of schools, but in some instances, hospitals and public offices as well. Along with the children, thousands of teachers, doctors and public administrators are all forced into the fields.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Uzbekistan, the world's third largest exporter of raw cotton, makes approximately \$1 billion dollars

a year exporting cotton. The cotton revenues do not make their way to the farmers or the children, but are funneled through various state-owned businesses and it is believed that the money ends up in the pockets of the government bureaucrats and executives who oversee the practice. The children who pick the cotton are rarely compensated and must toil in the fields for months at a time, receiving little more than meager meals for their labour.

President Karimov, who has led Uzbekistan since its inception as an independent state in 1991, ensures his regime maintains an outright monopoly on purchasing the cotton grown in the country. Uzbek farmers are forced to sell the crop

to one of several state trading agencies at less than one third of the market price.

Supply chain analysts trace the majority of Uzbek cotton to countries in South Asia and Eastern Europe. From there, the imported Uzbek cotton is processed and turned into garments that are mostly sold in retail stores in the U.S., Canada and Western Europe.

Several non-governmental organizations – among them Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group, International Labor Rights Forum, As You Sow, and the Center for Reflection, Education and Action – brought the plight of the Uzbek children to the attention of major international apparel brands and retailers in 2007. Since then, these brands and

(SAMPLE LANGUAGE REGARDING UZBEK COTTON)

MARKS AND SPENCER COMPANY LETTER TO SUPPLIERS

Cotton Fibre Sourcing from Uzbekistan

There have been ongoing concerns regarding the use of government backed forced child labour during the cotton picking season in Uzbekistan. We have been working with our textile suppliers over the past few months to firstly understand where Uzbekistan cotton may be used in M&S garments. Having done this review we are now specifying that our suppliers **MUST NOT** use any cotton fibre or fabric sourced from Uzbekistan. This will remain our position until such time that there is clear evidence of a change in the Uzbek cotton industry.

Cotton supply chains from field to retail are complex and lengthy. It has often been considered difficult to operate systems that confirm country of origin for all cotton fibre used in M&S products. However in light of the Uzbekistan situation we need to incorporate fibre country of origin (cotton only) into our buying specifications. This will be done through modification of the fabric technical submission document with immediate effect. We will, of course, work with suppliers in resolving any issues that may arise re: Uzbekistan but equally we need to act now.

Our position regarding Uzbekistan is part of an overall cotton sourcing strategy which is close to competition. We will advise further of our plans.

Yours sincerely,

Graham P. Burden
Sustainable Textiles and Cotton Specialist
Marks and Spencer

retailers, socially responsible investors, NGOs, and retail and apparel trade associations have joined together to try to convince the Uzbek government to end its use of forced child labour.

Nearly 25 major brands and retailers including Wal-Mart, Target, Nike, Gap, Levi Strauss & Co, Disney, American Eagle, Limited Brands, Philips Van Heusen, Vanity Fair Corporation, TJX Companies, Timberland, and JC Penney have all contributed to the ongoing effort to end forced child labour in Uzbekistan.

In Canada, Retail Council of Canada (RCC), and Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN), a labour and women's rights organization that supports the efforts of workers in global supply chains, have joined forces to provide advice and tools for Canadian retailers to inform their suppliers not to buy cotton harvested in Uzbekistan until the Uzbek government takes meaningful steps to restore basic human rights in its cotton sector.

RCC also urged the government of Uzbekistan to heed the recommendations put forth by the international community, to follow through on its public statements to end forced child labour, and to work proactively with the International Labour Organization, national governments and civil society to ensure they are defending, rather than desecrating, the fundamental rights of Uzbek children.

Visit the World Fair Trade Organization official website to read their recommended 10 Standards of Fair Trade: www.wfto.com

For additional sample statements and company letters, please visit:

- www.c-and-a.com/aboutUs/socialResponsibility/
- www.ejfoundation.org/pdf/Uzbekistan_Cotton%20Testo_letter_to_%20suppliers.pdf
- www.gapinc.com/public/SocialResponsibility/sr_enviro_design.shtml
- walmartstores.com/FactsNews/Newsroom/8637.aspx

Useful links to more Sourcing Responsible Cotton:

- www.asyousow.org/human_rights/labor_slave.shtml
- www.ejfoundation.org/page142.html
- www.ethicalcorp.com/content.asp?ContentID=5409
- www.cottoncampaign.org/2009/05/18/sourcing-responsible-cotton/
- news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/7068096.stm
- www.responsible-cotton.net
- www.share.ca/

For information on **String**, an online traceability program allowing batch-level product information to be shared easily throughout the supply-chain including applications for Country of Origin (COO) management, key performance indicators, visit: www.historicfutures.com
Stay on top of this issue by visiting Retail Council of Canada's web site at www.retailcouncil.org or by contacting us at 416-922-6678 or toll-free at 888-373-8245.