



July 17, 2009

The Honorable Hilda L. Solis
Secretary of Labor
U.S. Department of Labor
200 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20210
Fax: 202-693-6111

Dear Secretary Solis,

As the trade associations representing the companies that account for over 90 percent of U.S. purchases of cotton and cotton-based merchandise, we respectfully request your increased support for the U.S. Government to press the Government of Uzbekistan to end its use of forced child labor in the cotton fields of Uzbekistan.

We applaud the efforts over the last year by your staff in the Bureau of International Labor Affairs to address this issue, including highlighting the problem in the 2007 edition *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* report. Their efforts have succeeded in drawing the attention of the Uzbek government to this critical matter.

However, with little change in the situation on the ground in Uzbekistan and with the fall cotton harvest beginning shortly, this issue is at such a level of importance and urgency that we want to bring it directly to your attention. We believe that it merits the greatest possible degree of focus and coordination within the U.S. Department of Labor as well as interagency coordination with the U.S. Department of State, the Office of the United States Trade Representative and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Reports by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the news media clearly demonstrate that children continued to be forced to work in Uzbekistan's cotton fields under hazardous conditions during the Fall 2008 harvest in clear violation of international labor standards as well as the Uzbek government's own laws. Further, the reports allege that the Government of Uzbekistan is directly orchestrating the forced employment of child labor in the harvesting of cotton.

Our member companies are firmly committed to sourcing in countries respectful of human and workers' rights. In fact, this commitment is embedded in their supplier codes of conduct which guide them to source in countries and with business partners that follow workplace standards consistent with international labor standards.

As such, the organized use of forced child labor to harvest cotton in Uzbekistan is completely unacceptable. In fact, a growing number of North American and European retailers and brands have already taken measures to exclude Uzbek cotton harvested by forced child labor from their merchandise. Others will likely soon follow if this situation remains unchanged.

Uzbekistan is the third largest cotton exporting country in the world. Annually, Uzbek cotton exports generate over U.S. \$1 billion through the export of over 900,000 tons of cotton. This income is vital to the Uzbekistan's economy, representing around 20 percent of the country's exports. Cotton, in this context, has accounted for over 15 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in recent years. Consequently, any action by our member companies to limit or exclude the use of Uzbek cotton harvested by forced child labor in the production of merchandise could have dire consequences for the Uzbek government and its ability to meet the social and economic needs of Uzbekistan and its people.

We have urged the Government of Uzbekistan to take decisive and immediate action to end the use of forced child labor in the cotton fields of Uzbekistan. We have also written to the International Labor Organization (ILO) and our counterpart associations around the world to enlist their support in resolving this critical situation.

We request that you use your Department's influence to focus and elevate this issue within our own government, within the international institutions of the ILO, United Nations and World Bank, and with the governments of our neighbors and allies. We particularly urge you to utilize your Department's strong relationship with such organizations as the ILO to encourage them to take direct and immediate action to address this issue and engage the Uzbek government on this important matter.

Thank you for your continued attention to the Uzbekistan cotton matter, and we appreciate your response to the concerns highlighted above. We look forward to hearing from you about any plans that you may have for engaging the Uzbek Government, the ILO and other key stakeholders so that we can all work together to find a solution to this critical situation and, more importantly, ensure that all cotton from Uzbekistan is harvested free of forced child labor.

Sincerely,



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CC: Sandra Polaski, Deputy Under Secretary of Labor for International Labor Affairs,
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About Our Organizations

July 2009

American Apparel & Footwear Association (AAFA)

<http://www.apparelandfootwear.org>

The American Apparel & Footwear Association (AAFA) is the national trade association representing apparel, footwear and other sewn products companies, and their suppliers, which compete in the global market. AAFA's mission is to promote and enhance its members' competitiveness, productivity and profitability in the global market by minimizing regulatory, commercial, political, and trade restraints.

National Retail Federation (NRF)

<http://www.nrf.com>

The National Retail Federation is the world's largest retail trade association, with membership that comprises all retail formats and channels of distribution including department, specialty, discount, catalog, Internet, independent stores, chain restaurants, drug stores and grocery stores as well as the industry's key trading partners of retail goods and services. NRF represents an industry with more than 1.6 million U.S. retail companies, more than 25 million employees - about one in five American workers - and 2007 sales of \$4.5 trillion. As the industry umbrella group, NRF also represents over 100 state, national and international retail associations.

Retail Industry Leaders Association (RILA)

<http://www.rila.org>

The Retail Industry Leaders Association (RILA) promotes consumer choice and economic freedom through public policy and industry operational excellence. Its members include retailers, product manufacturers, and service suppliers--which together provide millions of jobs and operate more than 100,000 stores, manufacturing facilities and distribution centers domestically and abroad.

U.S. Association of Importers of Textiles and Apparel (USA-ITA)

<http://www.usaita.com>

USA-ITA is the trade association of the U.S. textile and apparel importing and retailing community, representing their interests before the Congress, the Administration, the business community and the public, and closely coordinating with exporting industries and governments around the world. Currently celebrating its 20th anniversary, with its headquarters in New York City and an office in Washington, D.C., USA-ITA addresses international trade law, negotiation and policy issues, including regulatory and corporate responsibility matters.