



**Presentation to the Helsinki Commission, 13th May 2008, by Juliette Williams,
Director, Environmental Justice Foundation (juliette.williams@ejfoundation.org)**

Good morning and thank you for this valuable and very timely opportunity to speak to you. My name is Juliette Williams and I am a founding director of the environmental justice foundation, a UK-based non-profit working internationally on environmental security and associated human rights.

Today, I want to make the direct link between severe human rights and environmental abuses and cotton production in Uzbekistan and show a short film that highlights our profound concerns.

Uzbek cotton production is one of the most exploitative enterprises in the world – governed and controlled by a dictatorship led by Islam Karimov.

Uzbekistan is the world's 3rd largest exporter of cotton, providing the regime with around 1 billion US dollars per year. The government rigidly controls all aspects of this industry: it dictates cotton production quotas; compels farmers to sell their cotton to state-owned export companies at a fraction of its true value; and motivates producers with an array of more or less brutal forms of intimidation and control.

Underpinning the entire industry is the systematic use of child labor and slave wages in order to maximize profits to the State, with little or no return to laborers or wider society. What this means is that every time we buy a garment containing Uzbek cotton, we are directly benefiting a small minority that is exploiting its own people for its own benefit, suppressing freedoms for the Uzbek people and meeting opposition with intimidation and violence.

Uzbekistan is, I believe, unique in its use of state-sponsored forced child labor. Each year, tens of thousands of children are made to work in the annual cotton harvest, with children as young as seven being given daily quotas they must fulfill. An estimated 200,000 children are conscripted to work in the fields in the Ferghana region alone.

Alongside this forced child labor and other well-documented human rights abuses, cotton production in Uzbekistan has been characterized by a devastating environmental cost. It can take up to 20,000 pints of water to produce just one pound of Uzbek cotton. The total failure of the Government to invest in a crumbling Soviet-era infrastructure means that that 60% of water diverted from water sources never even reaches the cotton fields. As a direct result, the Aral Sea, once the world's 4th largest inland sea has been drained to just

15% of its former volume, in what the United Nations has described as “one of the most staggering disasters of the 20th century”.

Such a system of exploitation has only been possible within the framework of totalitarian control. Efforts at liberalization, dialogue and outside pressure need to be seen within this context.

Such has been the concern in Europe that many of the EU’s leading clothing manufacturers, retailers and supermarkets – including Tesco, the world’s third largest retailer - have joined a prohibition on selling products containing Uzbek cotton. This is a considerable achievement in that it has required the implementation of extensive supply chain tracking mechanisms, and it has sent an unequivocal message of concern to the Uzbek government.

Along with the corporate action, European Governments have publicly expressed their disquiet, most recently witnessed by the Statement of the Dutch Foreign Minister, Maxime Verhagen at the 7th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council where he explicitly highlighted their opposition to the use of forced child labor in the Uzbek cotton industry.

Before showing the short film I appeal to the Helsinki Commission to engage in a full examination of the human rights and environmental abuses connected to cotton production in Uzbekistan. This process would prove extremely valuable and important, as Uzbek journalists and civil society activists have been intimidated, detained or are now in exile and the regime continues to stifle the flow of accurate information and deny that child labor or other abuses are endemic in cotton production.

EJF’s concern, shared I am sure by the Commission, is to see rural families relieved of state-enforced poverty, an end to brutal repression and to secure a better future for the Uzbek people.

Thank you.

SHOW FILM: WHITE GOLD, THE TRUE COST OF COTTON