Fashion Victims: Conventional Cotton is Taking a Heavy Toll on the Planet, but the Organic Market is Growing

By Brita Belli

When she gets up in the morning, a seven-year-old Uzbek girl heads not to school but to the cotton fields. She carries a plastic water bottle filled with pesticides. The June day is muggy and hot, and as she douses the plants, the chemicals burn her skin. In September, she will return to these fields, missing school for up to three months while moving between the rows of cotton, stooped over and picking furiously to try to meet her daily quota – between 20 and 100 pounds per day.

If the girl doesn’t pick the required cotton, or if the cotton she’s picked doesn’t meet the owner’s standards, she will likely be threatened or beaten. At night, the older children are sent to dormitories with up to 20 sharing a room, with little to eat besides bread and tea. They must drink irrigation water and have no running water for bathing. If they are lucky, they earn 38 cents per day for their efforts. Many of the hundreds of thousands of children suspected of forced labor in Uzbekistan’s cotton fields earn nothing at all.

Uzbekistan is the world’s second largest exporter of cotton (after the U.S.), selling around one million tons per year to Europe, China and elsewhere, according to the London-based Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF). Uzbekistan’s authoritarian ruling regime profits handsomely off its cotton earnings – some $1 billion annually – in exchange for its suffering citizens and hardened, barren land.

EJF stresses the link between protecting the environment and protecting human rights and has made the issue of cotton industry abuse the centerpiece of its campaign. In its report, “White Gold: The True Cost of Cotton,” EJF writes that in Egypt, a million children were used to control cotton pests. A 2003 report noted that more than 240,000 children worked in cottonseed production in the Southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh harvesting seeds sold by giant agriculture companies like Monsanto, Unilever and Syngenta. The children, mostly girls, ranged in age from six to 14, worked 13-hour days around dangerous chemicals and were paid less than 50 cents per day.

The U.S. cotton industry, represented by the trade organization Cotton Inc., says it can’t influence international policy. “We’re prohibited by law from getting into policy,” says Cotton Inc. Executive Vice President Mark Messura. “Much of the crop in China is handpicked by women and children. Much of the cotton in India is picked by children. But it’s beyond the scope of our organization. It’s really a part of these cultures and these societies. It’s a larger issue than us.”

But consumers buying cotton clothing are seldom aware that there cheap pants and shirts come at the expense of children forced into labor as well as irreversible environmental damage.

“Cotton is the world’s thirstiest crop and it takes more than 500 gallons of water to produce one cotton T-shirt,” says Petra Kjell, and EJF campaigner. “It is also the world’s dirtiest crop, responsible for the release of $2 billion worth of pesticides every year, and accounts for more insecticide release than any other single crop. A teaspoon of aldicarb – a pesticide widely used in cotton production in the U.S. – is sufficient to kill an adult.

The Organic Solution?
Even when American consumers are aware of the ugly truth in cotton production, it’s difficult for them to know the origin of a particular T-shirt. The label might tell where the product was stitched, but not where it was grown.
“Given the complexity of the supply chain, it is difficult to trace where the cotton was produced,” says Kjell. “An increasing proportion of Uzbekistan’s cotton is going to China, the world’s biggest exporter of textiles and garments, supplying to shops all over the world. The likelihood of Uzbek cotton ending up in clothes manufactured in China and for sale in the U.S. could therefore be considered high, but without a label stating where the cotton fiber is from, it is near impossible to know.”

An organic T-shirt might tell consumers a bit more about how that cotton was grown, but not how it was stitched. One could be buying an organic T-shirt grown by fairly compensated farmers but stitched by children in a sweatshop.

**A Better Cotton Future**

Organic clothing is now one of the fastest-growing natural product sectors. According to the Organic Exchange, organic cotton production increased 76 percent between 2005 and 2006, and demand for organic cotton almost doubled during that time. Sales of organic cotton are projected to reach $2.6 billion by the end of 2008. But while such U.S. manufacturers as American Apparel are selling organic clothing, they aren’t sourcing their fabrics from U.S. growers. Cummins blames American subsidies, billions of dollars which enrich a small percentage of cotton growers, drive down the price of conventional cotton, pricing farmers around the world into poverty. There’s no incentive for these mega-farms to go organic—a process that would require at least a three-year fallow period for the fields to meet federal organic standards.

“We’re not giving a dime to help farmers who’d like to grow organic cotton,” says Cummins. “There’s not even a mill to process organic cotton on the West Coast. American Apparel is the largest remaining U.S. T-shirt company trying to use more organic cotton, and it has to buy from overseas.”

Environmental groups have mobilized to bring awareness to cotton’s impact on global communities. In 2002, the World Wildlife Federation (WWF) launched the Sustainable Cotton Initiative, working with governments and industries in Australia, Pakistan, India and Central Asia to promote cotton that uses less water and hazardous chemicals. Through programs such as Women’s Open School in Pakistan, WWF taught women about the dangers of pesticides.

“We used to get many skin problems—rashes and dizziness,” says cotton worker Zohra Bibi. “We would use the same dirty hands for cooking afterwards and sometimes we would even use the empty pesticide bottles in our kitchens to store wheat! We thought that storing the wheat in the bottles would prevent it from getting spoilt! Now we know better.”

These on-the-ground initiatives are crucial to protect cotton workers and to begin to reverse pollution damage. But for a real overhaul of the industry, EJF says clothes shoppers must “pick their cotton carefully.” Consumers, say Kjell, should “refuse to buy cotton products unless they know that they were produced without causing environmental destruction or human rights abuses. Consumers can demand change and help create a massive shift in the way this commodity is produced.”

Nicole Santer, an assistant project manager with WWF’s Freshwater Programme, says clothes shoppers should choose the best available option, which she describes as “textile products made of organic cotton and/or made and traded according to fair trade standards.” Until a universal fair trade and organic label is applied, conscious consumers may be best advised to shop from their home computers.