

Philip Morris Improving Labor

May 10, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

ALMATY, Kazakhstan — U.S. tobacco giant Philip Morris International has made tentative strides in improving the working conditions of manual laborers on its suppliers' farms in the Central Asian nation of Kazakhstan, Human Rights Watch said Tuesday.

Charges that Philip Morris benefited from child exploitation and forced labor laid out in an HRW report in 2009 brought criticism from rights groups and U.S. politicians, prompting the company to review its policies.

Philip Morris announced this week that it would work with the international non-governmental group Verite in a bid to improve labor conditions.

"Philip Morris International's commitments to ensure protection of workers, including migrant workers, in Kazakhstan and in more than 30 other countries, is profoundly significant," said Human Rights Watch researcher Jane Buchanan.

Philip Morris buys about 600,000 tons of tobacco leaf from suppliers and farmers in more than 30 countries annually, including from 294 farmers in Kazakhstan last year.

Poverty and unemployment in neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan drive many laborers to Kazakhstan for work.

The group cited tobacco workers as saying employers frequently confiscated passports, failed to provide written employment contracts, did not pay regular wages and forced laborers to work excessively long hours.

Workers have also been deprived of basic sanitary facilities, access to drinking water and adequate living conditions, the report said.

HRW also documented cases of children as young as 10 working on tobacco farms in violation of Kazakh legislation. It said children working with their families typically missed several months of school.

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