



Jeans sandblasting said to endanger workers (News Feature)

By Carsten Hoffmann Dec 2, 2010, 2:06 GMT

Istanbul - For more than four years, Abdulhalim Demir, a Turk who resides in Istanbul, sandblasted jeans to give them a faded, worn or bleached look.

Jeans wearers in Europe may have been pleased with his work, but the dust that Demir inhaled on the job badly scarred his lungs.

'They paid us a bit more than the minimum wage. But we also got free places to sleep,' he said. 'I moved to Istanbul from eastern Anatolia. This kind of work attracted a lot of people.'

During his military service, doctors diagnosed Demir with silicosis, a fibronodular lung disease caused by silica dust that in serious cases can lead to respiratory failure and death.

International labour rights groups are now urging the garment industry worldwide to end sandblasting in denim production by unprotected workers.

They say it is immoral when jeans makers shift responsibility for the deadly process onto small subcontractors, many of them in developing countries, and give them free rein.

Before banning sandblasting in the textile industry in 2009, Turkey was a major producer of sandblasted jeans.

Over the years, the industry employed some 10,000 workers in Turkey, about half of whom have contracted silicosis, according to Yesim Yasin, a member of the Istanbul-based Solidarity Committee of Denim Sandblasting Labourers in Turkey.

She said about 50 of the workers had already died of the disease.

'The entire extent of the problem is only gradually becoming clear,' Yasin said, pointing out that sandblasters often showed no symptoms of silicosis for years.

Since the Turkish ban, many jeans producers have moved their sandblasting orders to basement workshops and small factories in countries such as Pakistan, China, Bangladesh and Egypt. Thousands of workers there risk death if they continue sandblasting jeans, warn labour rights groups.

Some five billion pairs of jeans are produced worldwide each year. Since the 1990s, jeans leaving the factory with a worn look have been in fashion. First stone-washing was the preferred process, later sandblasting was increasingly used. There are chemical treatments as well.

In Germany, it was even popular for a while to alter the colour of jeans with aggressive chlorine detergents or to bleach in various patterns. Today there is also a laser technique, which is much more costly than sandblasting, however.



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The Clean Clothes Campaign - an alliance of organizations in 15 European countries dedicated to better working conditions and workers rights in the global garment and sportswear industries - and the Swedish NGO Fair Trade Center are trying to dissuade jeans makers from sandblasting.

Of the 17 companies they have contacted, eight so far have promised to end the practice or keep it out of their supply chains.

'Actions by a few companies alone will not be enough to cover the entire sector. We encourage governments to look into a possible importation ban for these jeans,' said Wyger Wentholt of the Clean Clothes Campaign.

He added that jeans makers should also pay medical costs for sandblasters who have fallen ill.

'There's no cure for silicosis, unfortunately,' noted Demir, who sandblasted jeans from 1999 to 2002 and now calls for a global ban. 'In winter, sometimes only an oxygen mask helps.'

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