

House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Hearing on  
“The Atrocities Against Uyghurs and Other Minorities in Xinjiang”  
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Testimony of Tursunay Ziyawudun

My name is Tursunay Ziyawudun. I am one of millions of Uyghurs who are the victims of the Chinese government’s barbaric cruelty.

Chairman Meeks, Ranking Member McCaul, I thank you from the bottom of my heart, for inviting me to give testimony to the U.S. Congress. It is extremely painful to relive the nightmare of my year in a concentration camp. But the world needs to know what the Chinese government is really doing to people like me. I feel that I must speak up, as a survivor, for all those who have not survived.

I am not asking for sympathy for myself. I am asking governments around the world to wake up and save the millions of my people who are still suffering today in my homeland. The conscience of the world should not allow such a genocide to continue in the 21st Century. I ask the American government and the Congress to take real action to save the Uyghurs.

I grew up in Künes county, East Turkistan, where I ran my own clothing shop. I married my husband in 2008, and we moved to Kazakhstan in 2010. The Kazakhstan government granted residency to my husband, who is of Kazakh ethnicity, but my application was rejected.

Because my Chinese passport was expiring, I was forced to return to my hometown in November 2016 to renew it. As soon as I crossed the border with my husband, our troubles began. Border officials questioned me for several hours. “Why did I stay in Kazakhstan? What was I doing there? Had I been in contact with anyone from the U.S.?” The officials traveled with me back to my hometown, asking questions all the way. The next morning they came to my house to ask more questions. I had been excited to return to see my old home, but the questioning made me wish I had not come.

One month later, the authorities confiscated our passports. We had difficulties finding a place to stay, and the police continued to pressure us. I became sick with gallstones and went to the hospital for surgery. Soon after, the police said that I needed to meet with them in another town. After a four-hour bus ride, the police met us at the bus station and took me away from my husband.

That was the first time I was sent to a camp. The police took me there and dropped me off. The room was crowded with people, old and young. I was confused at first and thought we would all soon be allowed to leave. No one answered my questions about why I was there, and they took away our phones. I was allowed to talk with my husband through the gates the next day.

The conditions were terrible and filthy. After I was there for about a month, I fainted, and was taken to a hospital, where I was diagnosed with an infection. When I was returned to the camp a week later, it had been transformed into a jail. There were steel bars everywhere, and all the people inside were new. We

were told we had problems with our ideology and would receive education, but we would not be allowed to leave if we asked questions. Because of my health condition, the doctors said I should be allowed to leave, or I might die, and so I was released in April 2017. Later my husband got his passport back and returned to Kazakhstan; I had to sign a guarantee before he was allowed to leave.

The second time I was sent to a camp was far worse. It has left an unforgettable scar in my heart.

I was taken on March 8, 2018 and was kept there for almost a year. The camp had been transformed. There were high walls around it, with many new buildings, five stories tall.

At the beginning, four or five buses would arrive every day with more detainees. Many were crying and screaming, but the police would just beat them. It was very overcrowded. We were moved around to different buildings. I was moved to a building that was unfinished, the concrete floors not even dry. In each room, there were 12 people to three beds. At the end of the bed would be a toilet. Everyone could see you while you were using it. And then above the toilet and the doors, there were cameras. At all times, the guards were fully armed, with two of them standing outside the cell.

Every day at 5 am, a loudspeaker would force us to wake up. We would then have compulsory exercise, whether you were young or old. And after that, we were made to sing China's national anthem while flag-waving and saluting. We were made to swear our loyalty to the Chinese government, and say that we were loyal to China and that we would die for the country.

At 7 am, we would be given a breakfast of boiled water and one bun. We would beg for more because we were always so hungry. We had become like dogs, begging for more, but we were always told no.

After breakfast, we would line up outside the classroom for lessons. We were not allowed to talk to the teacher. We were taught Chinese law or Chinese songs. The guards told us that the more songs you learn, the sooner you could leave the camp. But it was not true. I learned 15 songs. I got 100% on the tests. But even then, I was not allowed to leave.

After the lessons, we would have lunch and sleep for an hour. Then they made us watch endless videos, usually about Chinese law and Communist Party Secretary Xi Jinping. We would spend so much of the day sitting on hard chairs that many of us got hemorrhoids.

At 7pm, we were given a black rice-soup, with a bun. Then from 7.30pm, they would tell us to exercise, even when we would complain about being terribly hungry. But none of the guards cared. If we complained, we got punished. From 8pm to 9pm, we would sing songs. Then they would make us watch more videos until 9.55pm, before having to tidy up, put chairs in the middle of the room, and place our shoes by our beds. Finally we would get to go to bed, but only after the guards had checked that everything was neat and tidy.

These were normal days. But in a year, we only had 10 or 20 of these. The rest of the days were not like this.

We always lived in fear. We spent our days listening to screams and feeling terrified that we could be taken away. Their methods of torture were always different, but a common practice was to tie us to a metal chair during interrogation. They cut off our hair, after pulling it through the bars of the cell, including that of elderly women. We were all handcuffed, shackled, and frequently called out for interrogation. The screaming, pleading, crying, is still in my head.

Girls would be taken away and only brought back days later. We were never allowed to ask what had happened to them, but we could see that they were being raped or tortured. I saw girls lose their sanity because of it.

When I was taken for questioning, I tried to be brave and stay confident, but they kept asking questions about my husband, insisting that he had joined some organization. Eventually I began screaming at them, telling them to stop asking me so many questions. Because of that, I was beaten and kicked until I bled.

Another time, I was taken with another woman, a 25-year old who had lost her parents. They locked me in a dark room while she was taken somewhere else. I was tortured with an electric stick pushed inside my genital tract. In the next room I could hear the young woman's voice. She screamed all night. I knew the guards were raping her. After that, she never stopped crying. Later, they took her again and forcibly inserted an IUD.

There was another woman who was taken to the camp because she had six children, in violation of the state birth-control policy. She too was taken and not brought back for nearly three days. Afterward, she could barely walk. Her whole body was bruised and covered in bite marks. Nobody could ask her what had happened, and she could not tell us. Otherwise, we would be punished.

Normally, no one would want to take a shower at the camp because the water was so cold. But one day she was just sitting under the cold water and crying. I felt so sorry for her. I went to her and just held her, asking what had happened. But she could not speak.

I remember too when an order came through saying that all the women had to be sterilized or have an IUD inserted. Many were crying, saying that they had never had a chance to have children. One of the younger girls — she was about 19 or 20 — was screaming, saying that she was not married and that she should not be having that kind of thing happen to her. But they did not care. They wanted all of us to stop having children.

Other times, we would be given injections of what they said was medicine, every fifteen days. After that, We would be in a lot of pain. It felt like a bug eating you from the inside. But when I was released from the camp, the doctors in China said it was nothing, "just a cold." It was as though the hospitals had been ordered not to say anything, because when I eventually went back to Kazakhstan, the doctors there said that I had been poisoned. And even after treatment, I still had abdominal pain. Other survivors who have been released said the same thing: something was still affecting us.

At the camp, we could not say no to the way they treated us. If we did, we would be punished. At the beginning, I tried to speak out. I asked why they would need to take my blood all the time. I used to tell the police at the camp that they were just acting out of fear. But then one of the teachers said to me, "If you want to live, you need to shut your mouth." She was right. I saw many people disappear just for asking simple questions.

Eventually, you forget to think about life outside the camp. I do not know if they brainwashed us or if it was the effect of the injections and pills, but I could not think of anything beyond wishing I had a full stomach. The food deprivation was that severe.

I was finally able to leave the camp in December 2018, after my husband had campaigned for me to be released. There was a sudden change, and they released all the people who had family members in Kazakhstan.

But before I was able to leave, the guards called me in again. This time they smiled. They asked me not to talk about what had happened inside the camp. Then they warned me: if I spoke about my experience, there would be heavy consequences. I remember crying, promising that I would not say anything.

Outside the camp, I was still not free. I was released to my hometown but I was not given a new passport, so I could not join my husband at our home in Kazakhstan.

If you want to travel from one town to another, you need permission from the authorities. After one of my brothers died from a heart attack, I left to go to his funeral without permission. I had turned my phone off, so when I turned it back on after a few days, I heard a frightening message that the local authorities left me, demanding that I come back. I rang them back, telling them that my brother had passed away, and that I needed to be there. But they just told me to come back. Out of fear, I went back to my local district.

I saw my former cellmate collapsed on the street, the young woman who was removed from the cell with me who I heard screaming in the next room. She had survived eight months in the camp before she was released. But she had changed. She said that her life was ruined, that she was finished because of what they had done to her in that place. She was like someone who simply existed. Otherwise she was dead, completely finished by the rapes.

Being released from a camp is not a real release. In my opinion, everyone who leaves the camps is finished. The government's goal is to destroy everyone, and everybody knows it.

Six months later I was allowed to leave for Kazakhstan thanks to the efforts of my husband. We agreed that we had to tell the world what was happening. I told my story to a Kazakh human rights group, Atajurt, and several foreign journalists interviewed me. But even then, I did not tell everything, I kept silent about being raped. It was too terrible to talk about after I was first released. I did not want to cause even more pain for my husband and my family.

I was also afraid of the Chinese government. The Kazakhstan government still refused to give me citizenship, so I was not protected from being returned to China. After my interviews were published in

the international media, there was a suspicious fire at our house. The Chinese police would call me and threaten me, pressuring me to go back to China.

It was only after I left Kazakhstan and came to the U.S. last year, that I decided that I could tell the full story of what happened to me.

I knew that my testimony about barbaric sexual abuse of young women would confirm the daily nightmares that Uyghurs all over the world are suffering. I knew that I might not be believed. I knew that some people would consider that my honor, and the honor of my family, would be tarnished. But with the support of my husband, I took my courage in my hands and told the truth to BBC reporters. The story was aired on February 2 this year.

In fact, Uyghurs all over the world supported me. I received many calls from Uyghur and Kazakh women and men in the diaspora, giving me encouragement and sympathy. They thanked me for speaking out despite the psychological pain of reliving my torture and the screams of other women, despite the fear of attacks on my character, and the fear that the Chinese government would retaliate against me or my family. They could not stop their tears as they thought about all their own sisters, cousins and daughters, and what they might be going through. We cried together.

As I expected, the Chinese government reacted to the BBC story by smearing me and the other women survivors who were brave enough to speak up about systematic rape, even a “culture of rape” that they witnessed. At a press conference in Beijing, the foreign ministry spokesman held up my photo and called me a liar. The foreign ministry claimed that the damage to our reproductive systems was caused by sexually transmitted diseases, not the abuses we suffered at the hands of the authorities. We were called people of bad character, “actresses,” and worse, by government officials and Chinese government media outlets.

I thank the U.S. government for rescuing me and giving me safe haven in this country. Without the quick action of U.S. diplomats abroad, and many concerned officials at the State Department in Washington, I do not know where I would be. At best, I would still be a stateless refugee, still fearing that the Chinese government could force me back to China at any time. I would not have had the courage to tell anyone what really happened to me.

I want to thank Atajurt, Radio Free Asia, AP, BuzzFeed, the BBC, and the other researchers and journalists who interviewed me, so I could tell the world about my year in hell. I also thank the Uyghur Human Rights Project for helping me come to the U.S., arranging emergency medical care as soon as I arrived, and helping me in every way. Many members of the Uyghur American community have showered me with their care and kindness, and I think all of them.

Now you have my testimony. I ask you to take action. Thank you.