

Gulbahar Jelilova

Female, Uyghur.

My name is Gulbahar Jelilova, I was born in Almaty Kazakhstan on the 4th of April 1964. I have been in clothing business for nearly 20 years buying from Chinese manufactures and exporting to Kazakhstan. In May 2017 I received a phone call from my business associate's daughter who told me that my Goods had arrived from Mainland China and I need to go to Urumqi as soon as possible to arrange the shipment to Kazakhstan as the storage charge is very high. I travelled by bus from Almaty to Urumqi, arriving on the evening of the 21st of May and stayed in a Hotel. The next morning three policemen arrested me in my Hotel room. I was taken to the police station where I was interrogated the whole day before I was taken to No.3 prison in Urumqi at around 11:30 pm.

They took my Kazakhstani passport away and replaced it with what appeared like an official Chinese ID card that had my photo. They stated that it proves I am a Uyghur from Xinjiang. They pressured me to memorize my new ID number.

The police accused me of transferring 17,000 yuan (£2000) from China to an organisation referred as Nur, which is based in Turkey. I told the police that I have never heard of such organisation and I have never transferred money from China to Turkey. But the police insisted that I was lying, after many hours of interrogation forcing me to confess to their accusations, I refused to admit to any of them as I have never been involved in such things. I told them: "You can kill me; you can do whatever you want. I'm just a businesswoman." At the end they said: "We will let you think this over." I was forced changing into a yellow prison uniform before being handcuffed and a black hood placed over my head and taken to so called Sankan, the Number 3 prison in Urumqi which was turned into an all-female camp a week prior to my arrival. I was held there for three months then taken to No. 2 detention centre in Urumqi before being transferred to a women's prison until I was released in September 2018.

The conditions of all three detention centres were overcrowded and dirty, there were girls as young as 14 and women as old as 80 in my cell. There were over 30 inmates cramped in a 14 square metre cell, we took turns to sleep every night because there wasn't enough space for everyone to lie down. A dozen or more women stood while others slept in shifts throughout the night. And the food was nothing that a human being should eat, the bread as hard as stone and soup made of water and cornflour. It was hardly enough to survive on. We were given three tiny meals a day: One small steamed bun and watery cornmeal soup for breakfast, one small steamed bun and watery cabbage soup for lunch, and one small steamed bun and watery cabbage soup for dinner. On one occasion we were given uncooked steamed buns, it just stuck in our mouths. We buzzed the prison guard on the intercom and informed them we can't eat the steamed buns. They replied saying, 'this is a detention center not your home. Don't you know where you are? In your home you can pick and choose but here you eat what is given. Perhaps you're too full that is why you're being fussy.'

Following this complain they punished us by giving us only steamed buns and water for one week, no soup. And then they accused us of speaking Uyghur. For one month they punished us by giving us only water and steamed buns. They also punished people in other cells for a similar reason. They said, 'you are forbidden to speak Uyghur, only speak Chinese.' They would feed us only if we spoke Chinese.

What made the circumstances much more intolerable was that we were not allowed to wash regularly. We could only have a shower once a week in which we all had to finish within 40 minutes. They gave us just one bar of soap. Each time, two people showered together. It was not really possible to wash properly in such short period of time and with such a limited amount of soap. Because of the lack of hygiene filthiness, we developed body sores.

In all detention centres, there are no areas free from the surveillance of closed-circuit cameras. We were not permitted to talk to one another. Most of the time during the day, we had to stare at the blank walls. The only exception being when we had political and Chinese language instruction from a monitor when we were given pens and paper. We were only permitted to write and converse in Chinese.

We were forced to take pills which had the effect of disorientation, loss of concentration, subdued, you couldn't even think about your parents or children. These tablets additionally stopped our menstrual cycle.

A number of women suffered serious complications. They fainted from the lack of food, had seizure, and mental breakdowns. I witnessed younger ladies screaming, and hitting their heads against the wall, smearing faeces on the wall, and refusing commands. Those ladies were taken away and disappeared.

I was released in September 2018, I learned that soon after I disappeared in May 2017, my family back in Kazakhstan began petitioning for my release. Each day they sent letters to the authorities in Kazakhstan and China. In the end Kazakhstan government managed to influence the Chinese authorities to secure my release.

On the day of my release, they called me from the cell placing a hood over my head. I was ordered to stretch out my arms which were shackled. I was taken to the prison hospital where I had physical check. It seemed like the police consulted with the doctor, who said that I couldn't be put on a airplane back to Kazakhstan. I had lost a lot of weight and was very weak. I was kept in the hospital for two days where I was given vitamins and drips. Two days later, the police officer responsible for me came and said. 'You are acquitted.' She removed the shackles.

Xinjiang governor Shohrat Zakir told state-run Xinhua news agency that people detained in the camps "will advance from learning the country's common language to learning legal knowledge and vocational skills."

During the time of my 15 months detention I moved from detention camp to camp, room to room, and never saw anybody spending any time learning something."

Medical examination

On the night of arrival at the No.3 prison, I was stripped naked for a medical examination. They took blood sample and urine sample before placing me in a cell. In less than one week, I along with other prisoners with black hoods over our heads were taken to an unknown place, there was medical equipment in the corridor, we were examined, and blood samples were taken, and we also had ultrasound tests. We were examined once a week stripped naked. I fainted once when I was in the No.3 prison, I was taken to the prison hospital where I saw many other prisoners and we all had medical examinations almost daily. In the No. 2 prison, there is a big medical clinic, we were examined regularly taking blood samples and ultrasound tests. We had injection once every 10 days. On the 27th of August 2018 before I was due to be released, I was taken to a big prison hospital for a check-up.