

Mihrigul Tursun

Female, Uyghur.

My name is Mihrigul Tursun and I was born in 1989 in Cherchen County in the Southern region of East Turkistan (officially called the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region). I am of Uyghur ethnicity. When I was 12 years old, I was taken to Guangzhou for middle school, under the Chinese government's programme to move Uyghur children to inner China at a young age. The aim of such programme is part of the Chinese assimilation policy to immerse Uyghur children in Han Chinese institutions, far from their native language and cultural environment so they embrace the Chinese way of life. However, my experience in this state programme actually made me more conscious of my ethnic identity. The constant discrimination and humiliation I experienced as a young Uyghur at a Chinese school in a Chinese city made me realise that I was different from the majority Han population.

I went on to study Economics at Guangzhou University and then worked for a private company that does business with Arab countries. In December 2011 I enrolled in the British University in Egypt to study English, where I met my husband. In March 2015, I gave birth to healthy triplets, two boys and a girl, who are Egyptian citizens. I had difficulty taking care of my three babies and on 13 May 2015, I left for China with my three two-month-old triplets to seek help from my parents.

As soon as I came to the border control counter at the airport in Urumqi, I was taken to a room for questioning and my babies were taken away from me. The authorities repeatedly asked me whom I met and talked to in Egypt. Then, they handcuffed me, placed a black hood over my head, and took me to a detention centre where I was held for three months. One day in July I was told that I had been "paroled" because my children were sick. They told me I could stay with them until their health improved, but they warned me that I was still under investigation. They held onto my passport, identification cards, and mobile phone.

I went directly to the hospital to see my children. My oldest son was in an emergency care facility and I could only see him through a glass window from far away. I was not allowed to go near him. The next day, the doctors told me that my son had died due to health complication and they gave me his dead body.

I noticed that all my three babies had been operated on their neck area, when I was in prison. I was told they were fed through a tube which went through their neck since they could not eat. I did not understand why, because I was breastfeeding without any issues before we left Egypt. My other two children had developed health complications and I spent the next few months seeking medical treatment for them, including an eye surgery for my daughter.

I was unable to return to Egypt because all of my documents had been confiscated by the authorities and I had been blacklisted. My ID card was barcoded, which beeped wherever I used it in a hospital, pharmacy, and even on a bus, so the police would check my card and had to approve every step I took.

In April 2017, I was living at home in Cherchen County when the police took me to a detention centre for the second time to interrogate me about what I did in Egypt. The security department officials tortured me by interrogating me for about four days and nights without sleep. They shaved my head and physically examined me. They locked me up for around three months before releasing me to a mental hospital because I kept having seizures and losing consciousness. My father was later able to take me home and look after me and I gradually recovered.

In January 2018, I was detained for the third time for no reason. The authorities handcuffed and placed ankle shackles on me. Also, a black hood was placed over my head before I was taken direct to a hospital. I was stripped naked and put under a big computerised machine. One female and two male officials examined my body while I was still naked and then dressed me in a blue prison uniform. It had the number 54 on it. A Chinese official reminded me that this outfit is usually worn by serious criminals who face capital punishment or life-time sentence in prison, and that "54" in Chinese also meant "I am dead."

I was very scared thinking this could be it, and I would die in this camp. I was interrogated for about three days and nights. During these interrogations, they asked the same questions: "Who do you know overseas? Who are you close to? Which organisation do you work for?" I think, because I lived overseas and speak a few foreign languages, they tried to label me as a spy. My hands bled from their beatings. They also gave me drugs twice, and checked my mouth with their fingers to make sure I swallowed them. I felt less conscious and lethargic, and lost appetite after taking these drugs.

Then they took me to a cell, which was built underground with no windows. There was an iron gate and the door opened through a computerised lock system. There was a small hole in the ceiling for ventilation and we were never taken outside for fresh air. There was a toilet bowl in the corner out in the open without toilet papers. There were cameras on all four sides so the officials could see every corner of the room, including the toilet area. There was one light that was always on.

There were around 60 people kept in a 40 square metre cell so at nights, 10 to 15 women would stand up while the rest of us would sleep on our side so we could fit, and then we would rotate every 2 hours. There were people who had not taken a shower for over a year.

The first night was very difficult. As I was crammed with other women on the floor with chains on my wrists and ankles also connected with a longer chain, I was thinking what I did wrong. Why am I here without any charges or explanations? What was my crime and why I deserve such inhumane treatment? Why I can't use the bathroom in private and have toilet paper? Why can't I have water to take a shower or simply wash my face? Why don't I get enough bread to eat or water to drink?

We were woken up around 5am each morning with loud alarms. We had to fold the six blankets we shared in the same way. If the blankets were not folded neatly and looked symmetrical, the whole cell would be punished. They would take away the blankets so we would have to sleep on the cement floor.

Before we ate breakfast, which was water with very little rice, we had to sing songs hailing the Communist Chinese Party and repeat these lines in Chinese: “Long live Xi Jinping” and “Leniency for those who repent and punishment for those who resist.”

We had 7 days to memorise the rules of the concentration camp and 14 days to memorise all the lines in a book that hails the Communist ideology. Those women whose voice were weak or cannot sing the songs in Chinese or remember the specific rules of the camp were denied food or beaten up. In theory, there were supposed to be three meals but sometimes there was no food all day and when there was food, it was mostly a steam bun. I must note that the steam bun we were eating got smaller and smaller as the number of people in the camp kept increasing. We were never given any fruits or vegetables.

They forced us to take some unknown pills and drink some kind of white liquid. The pill caused us to lose consciousness and reduced our cognition level. The white liquid stopped women’s periods, though it caused extreme bleeding in some women and even caused death.

As if my daily life in the cell was not horrific enough, I was taken to a special room with an electric chair, known as the tiger chair. It was the interrogation room that had one light and one chair. There were belts and whips hanging on the wall. I was placed in a high chair that clicked to lock my arms and legs in place and tightened when they press a button. The authorities put a helmet-like thing on my head. Each time I was electrocuted, my whole body would shake violently, and I could feel the pain in my veins.

I thought I would rather die than go through this torture and begged them to kill me. They would insult me with humiliating words and pressure me to admit my guilt. In fact, I had not been involved in any political activity when I was abroad. Then they would attack me psychologically and say “Your mum died the other day and your dad will serve lifetime in prison. Your son was in hospital and he also died. Your daughter’s eyes will remain crossed permanently, and she will be thrown into the streets because you cannot take care of them. Your family is torn apart.”

This was very hard for a daughter and a mum to take. I felt a huge sense of guilt and worthlessness. I cried and begged them to kill me. I don’t remember the rest. White foams came out of my mouth and I began losing my conscious. The last words I remember them saying was, “Being an Uyghur is a crime” and I fainted. When I first entered the cell, which was cell number 210, there were 40 other women, aged between 17 and 62. The cell was getting more and more crowded every day. When I left the cell after about three months, there were 68 women.

I knew most of the women in my cell. They were my neighbours, young daughters of my former teachers, and doctors, including a doctor, who had been educated in the UK and treated me in the past. They were mostly well-educated professionals such as teachers and doctors.

The most horrific days for me were when I witnessed the suffering and death of my cellmates. The nights were the busiest time in the camps; a lot of activities such as transferring people between cells or removing the dead bodies would happen at night. In

the silence of the night, we would hear men from other cells groaning in agony. We could hear the beatings, the men screaming, and people being dragged in the hallways because the chains in their wrists and ankles would make terrible noise when they touched the floor. The thought that these men could be our fathers or brothers was unbearable.

Unfortunately, I witnessed nine deaths in my cell of 68 people in those three months alone. If my small cell, cell number 210, in a small county, experienced 9 deaths in 3 months, I cannot imagine how many deaths there must be all over my country.

One victim was a 62-year old woman named Gulnisa. Her hands would tremble, she had red rashes all over her body, and she could not eat anything. She was really sick but the doctors in the camp determined that she was fine. The doctors at the camp were supposed to say the patients were fine because if they said the inmates were sick, they would be perceived as sympathetic or supportive of the patients. One night, Gulnisa was humiliated for not having memorised her lines in Chinese and she was crying when she went to sleep. She did not snore that night and her body was very cold when we tried to wake her up. She had died in her sleep.

There was another 23-year old woman named Patemhan. Her mum had died, and her husband, father, and brother were all taken to the camps. Her crime was attending a wedding in 2014 that was held according to Islamic traditions, where people did not dance, sing, or drink alcohol. She said all of the 400 people who attended that wedding were arrested and taken to the camps. When she was taken to the camp, she had left her two children in the backyard. She had been in the camp for one year and three months and she agonised every day over the whereabouts of her children. She had a bleeding for over a month and was denied any medical treatment. One night while she was standing with other women, she suddenly collapsed and stopped breathing. Several people with masks came, dragged her by her feet, and took her away.

After all the torture and suffering I went through, I never thought I would come out of the cell 210 alive. I still cannot believe it. Two hours before I was told I would be released; they gave me an unknown injection. I thought the shot would slowly kill me and began to count the minutes waiting for my death. I was surprised to be still alive when the authorities gave me a statement to read and sign. I read it and swore to it, and they filmed me doing so. The statement said: "I am a citizen of China and I love China. I will never do anything to harm China. China has raised me. The police never interrogated me or tortured me, or even detained me." The police warned me that I must return to China after taking my kids to Egypt and I must remember that my parents, siblings, and other relatives were at their mercy.

On 5 April 2018, after more than three months, I came out of that cell and was able to finally see my kids. I did not see my parents anywhere and was not allowed to ask about their whereabouts. I left my hometown three days later with my two children and stayed in Beijing for about 20 days because I was denied from boarding the plane three times for allegedly missing documents. On my fourth attempt, I was able to board on the plane and landed in Cairo on 28 April. I was lost and in deep pain. I did not know what to do. My parents and siblings could be in those camps and the Chinese authorities could kill them if I do not return to China, but if I did return, I would go back to die in a camp. The Chinese government could still keep my parents and siblings in the camps or kill them.

I gathered my courage and decided to tell the world about China's hidden concentration camps so those people who tortured me and others would be punished for what they have done.

Thanks to the help of many wonderful people, I was able to come to the United States. I cannot describe with words how I felt when I landed in Virginia on 21 September 2018. I was overwhelmed with the sheer joy of freedom and a deep sense of confusion that day.

I currently live in the United States with my two kids. Even though I am no longer in a concentration camp, I have not been completely free from the traumatic experience and the Chinese government's harassment. My life is still haunted by sudden episodes of fear and anxiety as a reminder of the horrific days I went through in the camps.

My children have physical and psychological health issues. They are scared when someone knocks on the door and afraid of being separated from me. I still have scars on my body from the constant beatings and pain in my wrists and ankles from the chains. I cannot hear in my right ear caused by the heavy beatings I received. I am scared of the dark but also too much light or noise. Police sirens give me anxiety and increase my heartbeat. Sometimes, I get shortness of breath, my whole body goes numb, and my heart hurts. I still have nightmares at night. Even though I was told I am safe here, I am still afraid at night that the Chinese police will knock on my door and take me away and kill me.

I also fear that the Chinese government officials are still monitoring me. Several weeks ago, a group of Chinese men followed me outside and continued to follow after I got into a car.

The Chinese government must have also forced my brother to reach out to me. He left a voicemail on the cell phone I brought from China. My brother said: "How could you do this to your parents, to us? What kind of daughter are you? You should go to the Chinese Embassy right away and denounce all the things you said about the Chinese government in the interviews you gave to the Radio Free Asia and tell them you love China. Tell them you were pressured by the Uyghur organisations in the US to lie about your

detention and torture in the camps and take back everything you said. Otherwise China can get you wherever you hide.”

I was terrified that the Chinese Government could still threaten me from so far away. As I am trying to start a new life in America, go to school, work, and take care of my son and daughter, I am still scared that the Chinese Government will try to hurt me.