

## **Omir Bekali**

### **Male, Uyghur**

Arrested March 2017 and released January 2018

(Below are 2 parts of the testimony. A short statement followed by an interview transcript.)

I was taken to a medical clinic or a hospital in Pichan, on the 26<sup>th</sup> March 2017. I heard the conversation between the medical staff and the police: "There are 2, 3 people in front of you for the Urine test, we will let you know when it is your turn to give a sample." They gave me water to drink before taking me to the toilet insisting that I produce for them a urine sample. About half an hour later, they removed my clothes from above my waistline, the first thing they did was to take blood samples from my arm. Then I was placed on a bed for a full body check, they used ultrasound to applying cold gel checked my kidneys, then ECG heart, my lung, I believe they were using ultrasound as a cold gel was placed on different parts of my body. I was moved from side to side and rolled over from off my back to my chest so that I could be tested back and chest. I believe it is possible that they used different equipment when carrying out their tests.

They checked my lungs, as I was told to breath in deeply and out slowly, the tests lasted for about two hours. After their completion, I was taken to a police station where I was given an eye test, my eyelids were held open and I was instructed to look left, right, up and down and at the same time they took photographs of the positions of the irises of my eyes. Then they took my fingerprints, and recording of my voice, this procedure lasted for about one hour. When I was taken to a detention centre it was about 8:00 in the evening.

The second time I had a full body examination was in the Karmay hospital, after I had been interrogated and tortured, I remember clearly that was on the 7<sup>th</sup> April. That was just before I was thrown into prison in Karmay. The medical examination was exactly the same, as before I had a black hood over my head. I believe the hospital was a large one as we had to travel up and down in a lift to reach different medical departments.

### **Interview record with Radio Free Asia**

"Ömürbek, you are the only free person from among those that were arrested, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Are you happy to go ahead with our interview?"

"Yes, I am happy."

"Could you please briefly introduce yourself?"

"I was born on the 30<sup>th</sup> April 1976 in Pichan County."

"What is your ethnic background?"

"My mother is Uyghur, my father's father is Kazakh, and on my passport, it is written Uyghur. I studied in Uyghur schools." "When did you move to Kazakhstan?"

"12 years ago, I am now a Kazakhstan citizen, a legal immigrant. I became a citizen in 2008. Since then I have been travelling backwards and forwards between the two

counties doing business. I have been coming to Urumqi without any hassle, and I have never supported any organisations or groups. Since 2016 I have been working in a tourist company.

As we scheduled a trade exhibition in Astana from the 10<sup>th</sup> June to the 10<sup>th</sup> September 2017, in March we went to Urumqi to attend a conference in promoting the event. Having completed the 3 days conference, I went to Pichan to visit my family. The following day at 10 O" clock the police came to the house saying they needed to speak to me. There were 5 policemen in uniform, they said, 'You don't know us, but we know you.'

That was on the 26<sup>th</sup> March, they took me away without any documentation then imprisoned me without any evidence, I was kept in prison until the 4<sup>th</sup> November despite me being a Kazakhstan citizen.

Both my parents are aged with my father being 78 and my mother over 60, they live in Pichan."

"What was the reason?"

"They said I was a suspect. They accused me of instigating terrorism, organising terror activities and covering up for the terrorists. After arriving at the police station, they turned the computer on and said there is a warrant for your arrest from the Karmay Public Security Bureau."

"But they didn't have an arrest warrant in their hands, is that correct?"

"Yes, they had no paperwork in their hands. I told them that I had only come to visit my parents and was leaving the next day flying back to Almaty. They said, 'we need to talk to you, it will finish in half an hour'. I was taken to Dariyaz police station, where we talked for nearly two hours, during which they didn't take away my passport or telephone. So I contacted my wife and some close friends telling them that there is a warrant for my arrest from Karmay, and I was held at the police station.

They became very worried when I told them what was happening.

They then changed my phone settings, so it stopped working, they said that the county officials need to see me, so they are taking me to the Pichan County Police Station.

They handcuffed me and placed a black hood over my head. When I asked them why they were doing that to me, they said that is the rule, and they do it to everyone. They were all young men and asked me to cooperate with them. I was taken to a hospital (or a clinic) first, where I was examined, and blood samples were taken, and it was a full body examination with my hood was never removed. When I heard them speaking about my examination, I was terrified that they might open me alive to remove some of my organs to sell them. It was a very traumatic experience!

After the procedure had been completed, I was taken to a prison, where I had to change into a prison uniform before being placed in a cell among 13 other young men. They were all Uyghur men in shackles. I was kept there in shackles for 8 days. On the first day, three men - one Uyghur and two Chinese came from Karmay to question me. They said: 'You assisted people with their visa applications, also you took money from them claiming you

could obtain a passport for them. Where did you spend all that money? We will carry out further investigation with you in Karmay.'

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> April, I was taken to Karmay."

"How were you transported to Karmay from Pichan, was a hood placed over your head and were you in shackles?"

"I was in handcuff and shackles, but no hood.

I was taken to the Jarenbulaq Police Station and placed in a basement cell. The following day the police chief came to question me, I will never forget what he said as he opened his mouth. 'Kazakhstan is equal to my xxx' (I am embarrassed to say the rude word he used)."

"Was he Han Chinese?" "Yes, his surname is Liu."

"I didn't react to what he said, as I knew if I said anything or argued I would get myself into more trouble.

They started to question me about the 43 years of my life. I told them everything, as I had nothing to hide. I was not allowed to sleep for two days as I was continually questioned.

They repeatedly asked, 'are you going to tell us?' What can I tell you? I replied. 'Which organisations are you in contact with? What is your purpose for entering the country, what service have you been providing to the people in Karmay? There are many people who have left from Karmay to Turkey, Syria, and Europe, you have been assisting them. Also, you are giving money to organisations.'

I denied everything they accused me of, after which I spent over an hour reading their statements of my replies before signing it.

They said, 'You are lucky that you are a foreign national, otherwise you would have experienced our wrath.'

Then on the 17<sup>th</sup> April, I was taken to Karmay City Prison."

"During that period, didn't anyone visit you from the Kazakhstan Embassy?"

"In June, during the month of Ramadan, I was told that officials from the Kazakhstan Embassy were coming to visit me, they asked me if I wanted to see them.

I said, 'yes, of course, I must see them.' After the Ramadan was finished, and when the Eid celebration had been completed, on the 16<sup>th</sup> 17<sup>th</sup> July they came, a diplomat from the Beijing Embassy and along with another diplomat from Urumqi. We spoke for one and half hours. They explained my rights and the responsibilities of prison to me before leaving.

In explaining my rights, they stated that first of all they have no rights whatsoever to torture me; secondly, they have no rights to force me to do heavy labour work.

In explaining the prison's responsibilities, they said "If I am ill they must provide medical treatment, and also ensure I receive three meals a day."

"Is that because you are a Kazakhstan National, therefore, you have those rights?" "The worst experience I encountered in prison was that from the time I arrived in that prison (in Karmay), my ankles were shackled together and then one ankle was chained to the bed. I was to spend every day and night until the 13<sup>th</sup> June eating, sleeping and carrying out my ablutions on the bed with the occasional wash by the young guards. And I remember that day vividly because they now used a metre of chain attached to my upper arm and ankle to bring me into a crouching position.

It was so agonisingly uncomfortable and I had to live in that position until the 4<sup>th</sup> November when I left prison. Later I was to find out that my mother and sister had campaigned for my release asking help from the Kazakhstan Embassy, also my friends and members of the public submitted letters of complaint and demanding my release. In the end diplomats from the Consulate approached the Chinese authorities saying that I should be released into their authority whether or they are going to put me on trial.

On the day when the diplomats visited me in July, that was the only time I was free of my shackles for about an hour and a half. When I stood up, I was not able to balance as I walked, I staggered like a drunken man. I know I was innocent; I have not broken any rules or laws I was confident that I was not guilty of any crime. However, when I was locked up in prison, I lost all hope of surviving. On 4<sup>th</sup> November, I was asked to sign the document, which stated the conditions of my bail. I thought I must leave this hellhole even if it is just to make contact with the outside world, and I signed the paper. People normally count hours or days, in prison, we count the minutes and seconds.

I was then taken to a re-education camp where I remained for 20 days."

"Having spent many months in terrible conditions in prison, how long did you spend in a re- education camp?"

"I was transferred from prison to re-education camp in Karmay on the evening of the 4<sup>th</sup> November 2017. And I regained my freedom on the 24<sup>th</sup> November. I spent 20 days there. The place was just like a prison, there are guards at the gate, once passing through the gate, I was taken for a medical examination. My blood pressure read 185 over 115, the lowest point being 115. I have never suffered from any illness or high blood pressure before."

"After arriving at the camp, were you allowed to contact your family?"

"I arrived late at night and was told that they would arrange for me to call my family the following day, but I waited many days before the arrangement was made."

"How many people were sharing one room?"

"There were 23 in my room."

"How big was the room?"

"The room we shared was not crowded. There were cameras installed in the room, so we were under observation all the time. People who were kept there were from the age

of 16 to 20, middle age as well as old people, and they were from all different backgrounds. There were government employees, teachers, I also saw a whole family - father mother and child. People who had completed their prison sentence were transferred there for re-education. The government employees were accused of being two-faced, which was the most convenient accusation to use.

There were even people brought in because they used Urumqi time. As I was leaving, I heard comments from the cadres that it was now the time to bring in people who work within the legal system. There were doctors, teachers, and lawyers starting to be detained.”

“Are they all Uyghur?”

“There were 70 to 80 per cent Uyghur, 30 to 20 per cent Kazakh, and no other ethnic people. According to what I heard, there were over 1000 young men. The camp was comprised of three different areas, designated A, B, and C. I was in area C, along with approximately 300 other men.”

“What do you have to do once you have been admitted?”

“The sleeping hours are from 12 am to 6:00 am. In the morning all beds have to be made of military style. If one failed to do it as requested, it will be considered as failing their ideology.

We must attend the flag raising ceremony at 7:30. After that we must wash and then go for breakfast before which we have to sing a red song, such as ‘where there is no communist party there is no new China’, or ‘Socialism is good’. Everyone must sing one of these red songs. Also, before starting to eat, we must say, ‘thanks to the party, thanks to the country, thanks to President Xi, I wish him good health; I wish president Xi live long and stay young.’ There is another long statement we must read as well, I skipped reading it, so on the third day, I was ordered to stand at the back for refusing to read the statement. After I spoke to them in Russian and Uyghur, they realised I was a foreigner, and they told me to sit down.”

“Do you have to repeat those words every day before eating?”

“Yes, that is the rules, and you must follow them.”

“What lessons do you have to attend?”

“Those who don’t know Chinese well, they are taught Chinese. Other lessons include party laws and regulations, the red songs - which praise the party. All lessons are taught in Mandarin, and there is an exam every week.

Also, during lessons, they inform you of cases that have taken place in court and sentences that have been given and what for. This is to create fear, in a way they use of these examples to tell people what a heavy price they will pay if they do not follow the rules. In between lessons, there is 2 hours of military training, marching, standing to attention, and following ordered commands immediately what I have experienced I now suffer from post-traumatic disorder, up till now I cannot sleep properly. It damages one’s psychology.”

“Have you seen anyone leave the camp when you were there?”

“No.”

“The cadres told me that it will take one year at least to complete the re-education program.”

“So you are a special case as you are a Kazakhstan National, you were treated differently. The re-education Camp started in March, April, didn't it?”

“In Karmay it started in March, at the beginning, people were taken to camps outside Karmay for one or two months. Later they converted government buildings and schools into re-education camps.”

“How many camps are there in total in Karmay? And do you have any information regarding them?”

“One in Jarenbulak District, where I was kept, and there are two or three in Karmay I heard. I also heard that they told the government ethnic minority employees that they must complete a re- education program to correct their ideology. The cadres informed their staff that it was directive from the central government, and they have no power not to comply.”

“What is the food like in the camp?”

“It was slightly better than the prison. Breakfast is rice soup. Lunch and dinner have some meat. I think they sent me there because they wanted me to improve before returning because I had lost 40 kilos in weight in prison.”

“While in the camp, what freedom do you have?”

“When I arrived there, after the lessons we were free to go get water from the washroom. But just before I was leaving, detainees were told they must stay in their rooms after lessons, they installed padlock and chains on the doors. I don't know what happened to cause the sudden change, but I felt there was a sense of emergency.”

“How many times were you allowed to shower?”

“Once a week.”

“Have you noticed anyone ill, not coping with the pressure and showing signs of mental health problems?”

“I saw old men with walking sticks, and other people limping. Regarding mental health, it is hard to know how people felt inside. They brought in people regardless of their disability or old age, claiming that they needed re-education.”

“In everyday life, people need essential items such as soap and toothpaste, if families are not allowed to visit, how did people obtain such items?”

“In the camp, you can wear your own underwear, but you must wear their outer clothing. In Karmay, they distributed winter clothing and shoes. Inside the camp, there is a shop only sells underwear and washing products. If you fell ill, you only receive treatment if you could pay for it.”

“What if you don't have money?”

“Then you don’t get treatment. In the beginning, they refused to provide me with medication, I argued that it was their responsibility to provide me with treatment. As my blood pressure was very high in the end, I was given blood pressure medicine.”

“Were there any incidents of deaths, have you seen or heard of?” “No. I don’t know of any.”

“So, you attended the re-education programme according to their rules and regulations, is that right?”

“It is compulsory; therefore, it is impossible for us to refuse any orders. Regardless of me being a foreigner and all the others, no one has the right to reject any orders. Because there are armed police, some of which carries wooden batons if you show any signs of disobedience they will come immediately and give you a severe beating. Therefore, there is no choice but to obey any given order. When I first arrived, I refused to speak Chinese; they said I was doing that deliberately. So during lessons, I was ordered to stand at the rear of the room. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day, when I leaned against the bookshelf, one of the officials pushed me shouting words telling me that I must not lean against it. There were other cadres present in the class as well, I shouted back saying don’t interfere! After that police came and removed me from the class and locked me in a cell.

In lessons, on my notebook I would only write my full name in Russian, nothing else, which caused outrage. They said I refused to re-educate myself, deliberately refusing to speak and write in Chinese, they demoralised me by swearing at me. So, I shouted back.

The police came, taking me and two other young men, I don’t know what they had done possibly they have refused a cadre’s order. Also, 5 other men and I don’t know the reason why they were removed. In total 8 of us were locked up. Normally after classes you are allowed to get water from the watershed, by locking us up they said we must learn a lesson and admit our wrongdoings. In order to be reunited with their family, and not sent to prison, they are forced to obey all the unfair rules and memorise that they have been taught for their exams because there is no other way out.

They claim that through re-education they can liberate people’s mind to embrace the party and love the country, to obey all the party rules and regulations. It was very difficult for me to comprehend the fact that just being an Uyghur or Kazakh, you were

forced to undertake such a re-education regime in a prison. Seeing so many innocent people were being treated in such a cruel way, I was deeply saddened; at the same time, it affected me mentally. During my time in prison, being chained and not being able to see the sun, suffering from the prangs of hunger, it is not possible to accept that your dignity is being stomped upon.

All of this will stay with me forever. I was not allowed to make a telephone call until the 19<sup>th</sup> day, despite being told on my arrival that I would be able to contact my family the following day.

However, they refused to make any arrangement for me to make a call, they made excuses every day. In the end, I requested the contact details of the head of the Karmay city court or the head of the City Judiciary, they said they would supply the details to me, but nothing happened. On the 19<sup>th</sup> day, the manager in charge said: "If you speak Chinese, he will come to see you immediately." I shouted back: 'Shoot me or take me back to prison, I am not going to learn your teachings.'

Three policemen came, twisted my arm behind my back placing me in handcuffs, and took me to a cell and locked me up. I screamed while kicking the door, the head of security came shouting for me to stop. I shouted back in Uyghur, pretending not to understand Chinese. I tried so hard to free my hands from the handcuffs, as a result, my wrists started bleeding, and they became numb. Eventually, they removed the handcuffs, but they didn't give me food for two days. On the following day, a policeman came asking me if I want food. I said, what crime did I commit to be punished like this? Normally you offer food to someone even before taking them for execution. He then brought me five or six spoonfuls of food, which was given by the detainees whom I shared of my old room. On the third day, I was returned to my old room. My roommates asked me if I had eaten any food, I said, 'no but only the five or six spoonfuls you sent me, but it helped, thank you.' On hearing what I said, they looked surprised saying: 'what are you saying brother, we filled a plate from our meals and sent it to you.' Only then did I realise that the police had thrown away most of it.

I was given a new quilt when I arrived there, and it was very difficult to fold into the required standard, so one of the young men gave me his quilt, which was easier to fold and in that it saved me from further punishment. I was deeply moved by the kindness shown by the people in every way, as they tried to show humanity to one another.

At about 3:00 O'clock in the afternoon, I heard my name being called, I was then told to collect my belongings and be ready to go. I said to my roommates: 'I might be taken to prison or freed, take care of yourselves.'

I was collected by a policeman who told me I would be released. I said don't joke with me, shake my hand if it is true.



Shaking my hand, he said, 'it is true. We are releasing you and you are returning to Kazakhstan.'

I said, 'I have been mistreated unfairly all this time, I am an educated man who can speak four languages. I know your language like my mother tongue as I studied it since being in primary school. I am qualified to be a teacher in your language.'

They were all surprised when I said this, saying, 'Oh you know Chinese.'

I said, 'yes, I have mastered it. I don't need education from uncivilised and uncultured people.' Before passing through the gate, I said to the policemen: 'I will make my complaints to all levels of government, and all the way up to the Beijing central government. I will clear my name of all the accusations that have been made against me. I will make sure they pay me compensation; also I will make sure the head of the department who ordered my arrest loses his job.'

I was sent to my sister's house; they were all in tears upon seeing me. From my point of view, they are hoping that the re-educating these people will make them come out like lambs, but on the contrary, they are planting the seeds of hatred and turning them into enemies. This is not just my view, the majority of the people who are in the camp, from the young to the old, of which 90 per cent of them are educated; they all have a sense of justice.

In my case. I made a decision that I will pursue the cause of justice." "Did

anything happen to your family members?"

"I don't know if they will be punished on hearing this, but I knew my brother was taken in one month after I left."

"Where was he?" "He was in Pichan."