

Testimony of Tursunay Ziyawudun
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Hearing on the Future of Women in China

Thank you, Chair Merkeley, and thank you Co-chair McGovern, for holding this hearing. I am very grateful for the opportunity to testify before the U.S. Congress, and to tell the world about my experience and the experience of Uyghur women.

My name is Tursunay Ziyawudun. I am from Kunes county, East Turkistan.

Although it is exceedingly painful and difficult for me to speak about my experiences, I see it as my duty to be the voice for those people who are in the camps built by the Chinese government, those who died in front of my own eyes, and those who are being held unjustly in prison.

I was locked up in camps two different times. The mental and physical torture I experienced in these camps have left indelible scars on my heart.

I was taken into a camp for the second time in March 2018, and stayed there for close to one year. There were many new buildings in the camp compared with the first time I was taken. They called it “education,” but in reality it was a high-security prison, with high walls, security cameras and armed guards everywhere.

What they called “education” was spending many hours watching propaganda films, memorizing Chinese law, and memorizing Chinese “red” songs praising the Chinese Communist Party. We were made to swear oaths of loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party, over and over again.

In the camp, we always lived in fear. We feared that we would be punished if we could not memorize the lessons correctly. Every day, we heard screaming and crying voices from other cells, wondering whether what was happening to others would happen to us, too.

Then it happened to me. Several times, the guards took me out of the cell and into an interrogation room, and they beat me. They used whatever oppressive methods they wanted.

Once, they took me out in the middle of the night, along with a young woman in her 20s. Next to the camp police officers wearing uniforms, there was a man in a suit, wearing a mask over his mouth. I don’t know where he came from. These men raped the young woman. Three police officers raped me as well.

They were always taking girls out of the cells like this. They did whatever they wanted. Sometimes they brought some of the women back near the point of death. Some of the women disappeared. I saw some of them bleed to death with my own eyes. Some of them lost their minds in the camp.

Every time I think about these things, my heart feels as though it's been sliced with a dagger. My nightmares make me feel as though I'm living in that fear once again. My physical body is free, and so is my voice, but I am suffering deeply. I am only beginning to overcome this suffering by telling my story.

I have to speak out, because the things I experienced in the camps are happening to Uyghur, Kazakh, and other Turkic women across our entire homeland. Millions of Uyghurs are suffering under this genocide for the past five years, since 2017. We appeal for help from you and from all of humanity.

I know that all of the CECC Commissioners are speaking out for Uyghur women. We are grateful to Congresswoman Wexton for advocating for Ms. Gulmira Imin, a young Uyghur woman serving a long prison sentence. We are very grateful for the Resolution condemning the genocide that was passed in December 2021. We are very grateful for the Uyghur forced labor bill that became law also in December.

I ask you to do more. I came to the United States with the help of the U.S. government and the Uyghur Human Rights Project, and since arriving here I have finally had the chance to tell my whole story. It is only after coming to the United States, which has allowed me to feel real freedom, that I have been brave enough to tell my whole story, especially about the sexual assault suffered by me and many other women.

Please do more to accept Uyghur refugees to the United States. There are many more people like me who managed to escape China, but they are not able to tell their stories. They are living in neighboring countries, but they are still living in fear. They are afraid that the Chinese government can pressure the authorities there, to deport them to China at any time. They receive threats, they are suffering great trauma as torture survivors and survivors of sexual assault.

Many families are still separated from their husband or wife, their children, their parents. I was rescued, but so many more people like me also need to be admitted to the US where they are safe.

I also hope that the Congress can do more to make sure that Uyghur torture survivors can get medical care and counseling. I am still not free of my nightmares, the mental anguish of my experience, and my mind is constantly imagining the suffering of so many others who are still

experiencing the same fate. Camp survivors like me need help for our extreme trauma, and other Uyghur Americans are also suffering terrible mental trauma because of the suffering of their daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, parents and grandparents. I hope the Congress will do more to help genocide victims, especially women, to get professional support to recover our health, and survive our past and present trauma.

Finally, I want to ask that the Congress support Radio Free Asia to do more programs on women, and for women. I listen to the Uyghur service every day, and I believe we need even more news reporting to expose the atrocities that women are suffering in the Uyghur Region. We also need more informational and educational programs on how Uyghur women can survive the mental torment that we suffer every day. More stories about the accomplishments and achievements of strong Uyghur and Kazakh women can help to give us inspiration and give us hope for the future.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.