

## **Congressional-Executive Commission on China**

### **Hearing: The Communist Party's Crackdown on Religion in China November 28, 2018**

#### **Testimony of Mihrigul Tursun**

Co-Chairman Rubio, Co-Chairman Smith, and members of the Commission,

I would like to thank the United States government and the American people for saving my life and bringing me to the United States of America, the land of the free.

Over the last three years, I was taken to Chinese government detention centers three times. I spent 10 months in the camps in total, and experienced physical and psychological torture at the hands of government officials.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify about my personal experience in China's so-called "vocational schools" or "re-education centers."

My name is Mihrigul Tursun and I am 29 years old. I am of Uyghur ethnicity and I was born in Cherchen County in the Southern region of East Turkistan, the Uyghur people's homeland, officially called the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. When I was 12 years old, I was taken to Guangzhou for middle school, under the Chinese government's program to move Uyghur children to inner China at a young age. This "Xinjiang Classrooms" policy takes thousands of Uyghur children away from their families, and immerses them in Han Chinese institutions, far from their native language and cultural environment. In effect, it forces Uyghurs to deny our cultural identity and religious beliefs, and to embrace the Chinese way of life.

However, my experience in this state program 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 realize 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. I always dreamed of studying English abroad and I finally had the opportunity to study in the British University in Egypt. On 10 December 2010, I left my homeland to study in Egypt, 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 4 May 2015, I took my mom up on her offer to help take care of my children and left for China with my three two-month-old triplets. My troubles began the moment I set foot in China.

As soon as I came to the border control counter at the airport in Urumchi, I was taken to a separate room for hours of interrogation. My babies were taken away

from me right at the airport. The authorities repeatedly asked me whom I met and talked to in Egypt. Then, they handcuffed me, put a dark sack over my head, and took me to a detention center. I was not able to see or breastfeed my triplets.

After three months, the Chinese authorities told me that I had been “paroled” because my children were sick. They told me I could be with them until their health improved, but they warned me that I was still under investigation. They held onto my passport, identification cards, and cellphone.

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, so I could not touch him to see if he was breathing. The next day, they gave me his dead body, saying he had been unable to breathe and they could not save him.

While burying my four-month old baby, I was tormented and filled with the guilt of not being able to save my son. All three babies had been operated on, on their neck area, when I was in prison. I was told they were fed through a tube on their neck since they could not eat. I did not understand why, because they were 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. They have been suffering from health issues ever since.

I was unable to return to Egypt because all of my documents were confiscated by the authorities and I had been blacklisted. There was a black dot in my identity card, which beeped wherever I went: a hospital, pharmacy, and even a bus, so 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 center for the second time and interrogated me for about four days and nights without sleep. I was incarcerated for about three months and then released to a mental hospital because I kept having seizures and losing my conscious. My father was later able to take me home to treat me at home and I gradually recovered.

In January 2018, I was detained for the third time for no reason. The authorities handcuffed me on my wrists and ankles, put a black sack over my head, and took me to a hospital. I was stripped naked and put under a big computerized machine. One female and two male officials examined my body while I was still naked and then dressed me in a prison uniform which was blue with yellow vest. 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 prison and that “54” in Chinese also meant “I am dead.”

Now, I would like to tell you about what I experienced in these camps during my incarceration.

I was taken to a cell, which was built underground with no windows. There was an iron gate and the door opened through a computerized 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, and they could hear every noise we make. There was one light that was always on.

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 neighbors, 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.

There were around 60 people kept in a 430 square feet cell so at nights, 10 to 15 women would stand up while the rest of us would sleep on sideways so we could fit, and then we would rotate every 2 hours. There were people who had not taken a shower over a year.

As I was crammed with other women on the floor with chains on my wrists and ankles also connected with a longer chain, I remember thinking about what I did wrong. Why am I here without any charge or explanations? What was my crime and why I deserve such inhumane treatment? Why I can't use the bathroom in private and have a 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 5 am 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 memorize the rules of the concentration camp and 14 days to memorize 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 even as the number of people in the camp kept increasing in numbers. 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 caused loss of menstruation in some women and extreme bleeding in others and even death. I was also forced to take some unknown drugs. They 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.

During many days and nights of interrogations, they asked the same questions: "Who do you know overseas? Who are you close to? Which organization do you work for?" I think, because I lived overseas and speak a few foreign languages, they tried to label me as a spy.

I clearly remember the torture I experienced in the tiger chair the second time I was incarcerated. I was taken to a special room with an electrical 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. My head was shaved beforehand for the maximum impact. 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 insulted me with humiliating words and pressured me to admit my guilt. In fact, I had not been involved in any political activity when I was abroad. Then they attacked me psychologically and said, "your mom 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 because of you."

This was very hard for a daughter and a mom 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, I began losing my consciousness, and I fainted.

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 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 memorized 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 mom 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 at the wedding. 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 kids in the field. She had been in the camp for one year and three months and she agonized every day over the whereabouts of her kids. She had heavy menstrual bleeding for over a month and was denied any medical treatment. One night while she was standing with other women, she suddenly dropped to the floor and stopped breathing. Several people with masks came, dragged her with her feet, and took her away.

I never thought I would come out of the cell 210 alive. I still cannot believe it, but miracles do happen. Two hours before I was told I would be released, the Chinese authorities 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 find my parents at home, however, 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 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 did not return to China, but if I did return, I would go back to die in the camp and the true nature of those camps would go back to that dark cell with me. 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 did and the voice of those innocent people in the camps could be heard.

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. Did I already die in the camp and was now in heaven? Or was I really in this free and great country that I have always dreamed of coming to? It was too good to be true.

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 kids 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 on my right ear caused by heavy beatings. I am scared of dark but also scared of 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 Chinese government officials are still monitoring me. Several weeks ago, a group of Chinese men were following 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 organizations in the U.S. 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.

I will take this opportunity to kindly request that the US Government take steps to provide assurance for my safety. Exposing the real nature of China's concentration camps puts my life and my kids' lives in danger even in the United States, so please do what is necessary to ensure that we remain safe in this country. Additionally, I was forced to swallow many unknown pills and given injections in the camp and I do not know what kind of drugs my kids were forced to take in while I was in the camp. I would really appreciate the opportunity to go through a thorough medical examination and treatment.

This is my story. But I am only one of the millions of Uyghurs and other ethnic groups targeted for punishment or death in concentration camps. I am blessed to have miraculously escaped the camps and I have the freedom to speak out on behalf of those being tortured in the concentration camps as we speak.

The Chinese government made it clear that the cost of my speaking out would be the lives of my parents and siblings. I feel unbelievably guilty for that, and it is a form of ongoing mental torture I suffer every day. But I believe I also have a moral obligation to tell the truth to the world so that someone can take an action to stop this atrocity.

My people look to the United States as the beacon of hope for the oppressed people around the world. While every other country in the world is turning a blind eye to this brutality to avoid falling from China's grace, I want to tell the truth to the government of the United States, the most powerful country in the world and the only country that has the courage and the ability to tell China to stop its ethnic cleansing of Uyghur people.

I hope that the United States will lead the world community to condemn China's gross violations of universally recognized human rights, and pressure China to close these concentration camps and release millions of innocent Uyghurs and other minorities. The Chinese government's systematic abuse of Uyghurs inside and outside the camps demonstrate that it thinks it is too powerful to be held accountable for its crime to eliminate the Uyghurs as a people. I still remember the words of the Chinese authorities when I asked what my crime was. They said, "you being an Uyghur is a crime."

Please take an action against the Chinese officials responsible for my torture, and the death of my little boy, and the deaths of so many innocent Uyghurs in the camps.

Please help stateless Uyghur refugees around the world, who will certainly be taken to the camps if they return, seek refuge in this great country.

And finally, if any Member of Congress goes to China, please ask where my mother, father, and siblings are.

Thank you for your concern and attention.