

Uyghur Tribunal – Fact Witness statement
Mehray Mezensof (UTFW2-024) about husband Mirzat Taher

SUMMARY

This is an indirect witness statement in relation to the witness's husband. The witness is Australian and her husband was arrested in April 2017 two days before they were due to move to Australia. Her husband was interrogated for 3 days in relation to his activities abroad in Turkey, enduring the tiger chair and sleep deprivation throughout. During and after this interrogation her husband suffered unconscious episodes leading him to spend time in hospital. After this he was taken to a detention camp.

She recounts details of communications she and their family received whilst he was in detention which was limited to a video, photos, and a letter. Her husband was subsequently moved to a re-education school. He was allowed to have brief phone calls in Mandarin during this time and one brief video call.

She noticed during the time he was detained Urumqi changed dramatically including extra police stations, heavy police presence on the streets and updated surveillance systems. She noticed mostly men were targeted for detention, especially those who had travelled abroad. She changed her behaviour including stopping wearing a headscarf for fear of endangering her husband's family.

The witness's husband later revealed he endured psychological torture throughout his detention. He suffered inhumane treatment in the camps including sleep deprivation, constant surveillance, confinement to cells, extreme arbitrary punishment for various behaviour such as food deprivation. He also revealed how the inmates were forced to undertake hours of lessons on the communist party including propaganda video and 'confessions' of their crimes. Upon his release he still endured harassment from police officers and was re-arrested on two further occasions. The last time was in September 2020 and since then the witness has lost all contact with him.

Mehray Mezensof (UTFW2-024)

1. My name is Mehray Mezensof. I am 27 years old. I'm an ethnic Uyghur but I was born and raised in Australia so I'm an Australian citizen by birth.
2. This is my husband, his name is Mirzat Taher. He is 30 years old. He was born in the capital city of Urumqi, and he worked with his father in their family business. They had a kebab shop and he used to help his dad working there.
3. My husband first travelled to Turkey in 2014. He went there on a travel visa. He stayed there for 1 month and he ended up really liking Turkey, so he decided that he wanted to study there. In 2015 he applied for a student visa, and he got an invitation letter from a Turkish language school and so he went to Turkey, and he studied the language for about 6 months and then after the 6 months he worked in Turkey as a tour guide for another 6 months. Altogether my husband spent about 1 year in Istanbul.
4. My husband and I met in the middle of 2016 and then we decided to get married. So, I travelled to Urumqi in July and my husband, and I got married in August. After we got married, I straight away applied for my husband's Australian visa because we decided that he would come to Australia and live here with me. Whilst we were waiting for the visa to be accepted, I lived in Urumqi with him during that time. Then after 7 months my husband's Australian visa was accepted, and this was in April 2017. This was when we first started hearing about Uyghurs being taken away by police and put into concentration camps.
5. So, my husband and I immediately booked our tickets to Melbourne for the 12th of April, and it was on the night of the 10th of April that 2 policemen came into our home, and they took my husband away.
6. When my husband Mirzat Taher was first detained on the night of April 10th 2017, he received a phone call from 2 police officers from Toutunhe District (where his

household registration is registered). They told my husband on the phone that they wanted to talk to him about something important and asked that he wait for them in his home as they were already on their way to see him. After receiving this call my husband was worried as we had heard at the beginning of April that Uyghurs were disappearing in the middle of the night. However, my husband's family reassured him that because he had never been in trouble with the police in the past that it was probably nothing to worry about.

7. The first thing the 2 plain clothed policemen asked my husband when they came into our home was "Have you travelled overseas?" My husband answered that yes, he had and that he had lived in Turkey for a while. Upon hearing this the policemen asked my husband to give his passport to them and they confiscated it immediately. Once they looked through his passport and saw the Turkish visas and entry & exit stamps, they said that my husband needed to go back to the police station with them for further questioning. It was at this point that we realized that it actually wasn't going to end here.
8. My husband had started shaking and he was begging the police officers to ask him whatever questions they needed here in his home and to not take him back to the police station. We begged them to show leniency as my husband and I had our tickets to Melbourne booked for the 12th of April and we needed to leave. They refused to listen to our cries and said that he had to come with them. My husband walked out of the house with tears in his eyes and his parents followed him and the 2 police officers. They begged the officers to tell them where they were taking him, and they told us the location. My husband said that as soon as they took him out of the house they walked up to the main road where the police officers made him sit in a squad car with 3 policemen armed with rifles.
9. My husband was interrogated at the police station for 3 days. During these 3 days he was forced to sit in a tiger chair throughout the interrogation and he was deprived of sleep. He said the questioning took place at night and the police officers took turns in interrogating him and they repeatedly asked the same questions over

and over again. All their questions were in regards to what my husband did whilst he was in Turkey, where he stayed and who he had associated with during his stay. The police were concerned about the high number of entry & exit stamps which were on his passport. Although my husband stayed in Turkey for about a year, during that year he had travelled back and forth between Istanbul and Urumqi due to personal reasons, such as attending weddings and frequently visiting his family.

10. During these 3 days I was at the police station every day. My in-laws were trying to speak with the officers in charge and they were trying to find out what was going on and how long they planned to keep my husband there. On the 3rd day whilst I was sitting in front of the main entrance my husband was brought out to one of the holding cells on the first floor.
11. From where I was sitting, I could see my husband in the holding cell, but I could not talk to him. He was looking at me and he was crying and then all of a sudden, he fainted and fell down to the ground. Officers rushed in and tried to sit him up but my husband had lost consciousness and his whole body was convulsing. Not long afterwards, paramedics arrived, and my husband was taken to the hospital. A series of tests were conducted to try and find out if my husband had any pre-existing medical conditions which he didn't. He stayed in hospital for 24 hours and I was allowed to stay with him. My husband was guarded by 4 different plain clothed policemen during those 24 hours and they only ever left his side when he went to the bathroom.
12. After the 24 hours were up the policemen took my husband and told his family not to come back to the police station with them. We were ordered to go home and we were told that my husband would be questioned for another week and then he would be released. However, this wasn't the case because after 3 days we received a phone call from police notifying us that my husband had suffered yet another unconscious episode and that they were taking him to the hospital. This is when my husband told me that after he left the hospital, and we parted our ways that he was immediately taken into a detention center.

13. The first thing they did was shave his head and they subjected him to a strip search and then he was interrogated everyday by different policemen who continued to ask the same questions. He said he was deprived of sleep at night and was barely able to sleep through the day. Each time he was taken out of his cell to be interrogated he said he was forced to sit on the tiger chair. During those 3 days my husband said he hardly had anything to eat or drink.
14. My husband ended up spending the next 10 days at hospital. He was admitted and the doctors ran a full set of tests to try and determine exactly what was wrong with him. During this time my husband was guarded by 4 different plain clothed policemen; 2 of whom were Uyghurs and 2 of whom were Han Chinese. The officers worked on a rotating-shift and they never left my husband unguarded. During these 10 days the officers allowed me to stay next to my husband.
15. By this time, we had started hearing about out these “re-education schools” from neighbours and whispers on the street. We confronted the officers about these schools, and they said it was impossible for my husband to be taken there as there were no schools built in the Toutunhe District. They said that if my husband cooperated then it would all be over in a couple of weeks. They kept telling us not to worry and that it would all be over soon.
16. My husband didn't believe them, and he told me that he was being treated like a criminal by these officers. He said that although they're talking to us nicely here in the hospital, they treated him worse than an animal when he was detained. My husband said he would rather die than have to go back to that detention center. He spoke about killing himself numerous times whilst he was in the hospital.
17. On the 10th day the police official in charge of the arrest of my husband came to the hospital and demanded that he be brought back into police custody as all of his test results came back negative and showed that he was healthy. My husband and I were forced to say goodbye to each other. I still remember the police officers telling

us that all we had to do was wait 2 weeks and then we would see each other again.

18. My husband was taken back to the detention center and we didn't hear from him for several weeks until my in-laws were able to find a contact who then helped pass on information to us about my husband's wellbeing. Not long after we were told that we were allowed to bring in clothes and money to my husband. My in-laws and I went to the detention center every week and brought in money and clothes however not once were we allowed to see him.
19. Almost every day our contact used to call us and let us know how my husband was going. He spoke about how my husband's Mandarin was very good and that he had quickly formed a good relationship with the guards and the officials in charge. He told us that my husband was studying and that he was doing exceptionally well.
20. On the 27th of October 2017 we received a video and photos of my husband whilst he was in the detention center. A different contact had helped us to receive these photos. We also received a letter from my husband that was written in Mandarin and was dated the 5th of June 2017.
21. On 3 separate occasions we received more photos of my husband. In all of these photos he was wearing a green-coloured vest which we found out was a way to sort the detainees. We were told that the green colour symbolized that these people were only temporary detainees and that they were not seen as dangerous or a threat. In one of these photos which was taken on the 20th of December 2017 it can be clearly seen that my husband was studying in what looked like a classroom. He was looking away from the camera and had a pen and notebook in his hands.
22. After my husband was detained, I remained in Urumqi for another 6 months. During these 6 months I noticed huge changes that were happening in the city. Police stations were being built within 500 meters of each other. There was a heavy police presence out on the streets and the surveillance systems were updated. So many people had gone missing and at first most of them were men. No matter who I

spoke to out on the streets, either their sons or their husbands had been taken away. I found out that police were targeting Uyghurs who had travelled abroad. Most shops were closed down as a result of that person being taken away and other shops closed down due to there being a stop in exports of products from other countries (particularly Turkey).

23. At this time, I started wearing my headscarf in the style of a turban (May 2017) and when Winter came, I wore a beanie to keep my hair covered. Although as a foreigner the police probably couldn't force me to take off my headscarf, I decided I would wear it in a different style to ensure that I didn't look "too religious" to them. The next year in March 2018 I completely took off my headscarf in fear of further endangering my husband's family. I also took it off in order to keep myself safe as there was no way for police to know that I was a foreigner and if they decided to arrest me because they thought I looked "too religious" I knew they wouldn't stop to ask first if I was a foreigner or not.

24. Due to personal reason, I flew back to Melbourne in October 2017. I was able to stay in contact with my in-laws during this time. In December they told me that they heard from an officer that my husband was going to be released from the detention center. I still had a valid Chinese visa so upon hearing this news I booked my tickets back to Urumqi within a couple of weeks. When I arrived back in Urumqi at the end of December, I waited for the news of my husband's release, but it never came.

25. Later in March 2018 I received a phone call from my husband himself saying that he has been transferred to a "re-education school." During this time, my husband was allowed a 3-minute phone call to one of his family members every 2-3 weeks. He was forced to speak Mandarin during these calls however because I couldn't speak it the police allowed him to speak to me in our mother tongue. Due to our phone calls being monitored and also due to the short duration of the call our conversation was very limited.

26. Every time my husband called, he would say the same thing, that he was okay, that

his studies were going well and that we shouldn't worry about him that he was being looked after. He would always tell me how much he missed me and how much he wanted to see me. His biggest fear was that I wouldn't wait for him so during these calls he always pleaded with me to wait for him and to never leave him. I constantly reassured him and tried my best to hold back my tears. My husband said that if we cried then his phone privileges would be taken away from him.

27. On the 24th of April 2017, my in-laws received a phone call from police officials telling us that we were allowed a video call with my husband which they would arrange. They told us where to meet them and what time the video call would be taking place. We drove out to the Toutunhe District and found ourselves being directed to an abandoned bank building. Besides our car there were only a few other cars parked in the parking lot.

28. We entered the building escorted by police officers and were told to fill out our details and then wait until we were called. I noticed that there were 2 other families who were waiting. They told me that they were also waiting to video call with family members who were in these "re-education schools". For one of the families, it was not their first time and for the other family it was their first time just like us. Before heading into the room where we would video call with my husband we were subjected to a search and all our personal belongings were taken away by police. We were also told not to cry and make a scene otherwise the call would be ended immediately. The video call was monitored by 2-3 police officers and the call lasted around 10-15 minutes. On their side we could see that a room had been set up with a couch and tall plants that completely obscured the background.

29. When I saw my husband, I noticed that he had lost a fair amount of weight and that he was very pale. I remember my husband speaking about how he's a changed man and how much he has learnt. Although I couldn't see them, I could tell that there were other officers in the room with my husband as he kept glancing at them during the call. When we tried to ask more questions about what he was doing there we were told to not ask those kinds of questions and to speak about other things.

30. This was the first and last time I saw/spoke with my husband over video call as I decided that it was best for me to leave for Australia and wait for my husband there, so at the end of April 2017 I went back to Melbourne.
31. Whilst my husband was in the concentration camp, he managed to write 2 letters. One of the letters was written in Mandarin and was allowed by police to be received by his family. This letter was dated the 14th of May 2018 and was received after 2 months on the 7th of June 2018. The second letter was written in English and was smuggled out. I was able to receive this letter through a contact. The letter had been dated the 21st of May 2018 however my husband was only able to get this letter out several months later on the 5th of July 2018. The letter didn't go into any detail about his situation but was more of a love letter to me. My husband reassured me that he was okay and that he would come to me soon.
32. My husband was released on the 22nd of May 2019. The police said that my husband had graduated, that he finished his education and that he can go back home, back into society and work and live normally like everyone else.
33. away and reunited with him in Urumqi in July that year. When I saw my husband, I noticed he had lost a lot of weight (10 kilograms) and he was also very pale, he had lost all the colour in his face.
34. Due to the reason being that my husband had gone through a traumatic ordeal for the past 2 years I didn't force him into telling me about what he experienced in the camps. My husband slowly opened up to me about some of the things that happened to him. He told me about how the lights were kept on in their cells 24/7 even during the night. He said that each detainee took shifts keeping guard over each other at night as no one was allowed to sleep for the whole duration of the night. He said that there was a camera in every corner of the room except for the area where the toilet was.

35. He said that when he was first taken to the concentration camp he was forced to eat and sleep near the toilet. The detainees were allowed a cold shower for only a couple of minutes every few weeks and they were not given any soap. He said he had to use laundry detergent to clean himself. He spoke about how they weren't allowed to leave their cells and were only allowed to leave when they had classes. He said that no one was allowed to go outside and the only physical exercise they could do was to walk around in their cell. Everyone was expected to speak in Mandarin and the Uyghur language was strictly prohibited from being spoken. My husband told me that one time he accidentally spoke to a police officer in Uyghur he was punished by being handcuffed and strung up to the door for a whole day, and was refused food and water.
36. He said that most of the abuse that took place was mainly psychological. He spoke about how the detainees were constantly told that they would never go home, they would never see their loved ones again and the only way they would get out was in a body bag. He said that he struggled a lot with hygiene as they weren't given soap, shampoo or any other products to help maintain their cleanliness. He said that everyone had their meals in their cells and there was an opening in the door where the food tray would be passed. He said in order to get the food he would have to kneel and sing a song and only then would the officers give the food. Anyone who couldn't or wouldn't sing the song was left to starve.
37. That's another thing he spoke about. He said that if anyone in the cell misbehaved or disobeyed any orders then they were all punished by having their food privileges taken away. He said that even when they were given food half the time he didn't know what he was eating and the food had no nutritional value at all. He said it was barely enough to just keep them alive. He said that most of the food was soft or was in liquid-form like a soup so he said that after months of eating the same thing he felt his teeth start to loosen. He said that although the food was limited they were usually given lots of steam buns. He said that in order to regain strength in his teeth he would set the steam bun on the window sill and leave it there to harden. Once it was hard enough he said that him and the other detainees would use it to bite into

frequently to help sharpen their teeth.

38. My husband spoke about how their lessons included singing and memorizing songs about the communist party. He said that as well as reading from books they were also forced to watch different propaganda videos for hours. He mentioned that he had been reading so much that his vision had become impaired for a couple of months. During their lessons all the detainees were also forced to “confess their crimes” by writing a speech and then reading it out to the class. Depending on the reason why they were detained they would have to apologize for their wrong doings and then promise they wouldn’t do it again. My husband said his speech involved him talking about how he travelled abroad to Turkey and he never should of gone in the first place and he now realizes his mistake and realizes that China is such a great country that he should have never wanted to leave in the first place.
39. My husband told me that when he was transferred from the detention center to the concentration camp that both his hands and feet were handcuffed and chained together and a black long hood that reached below his chest was put over his head. He said that for one detainee there was 3 policemen guarding them, 2 on each side and 1 behind them who held their necks down so that they were in a bent position and unable to stand straight. He said that when they arrived at the facility they had to pass through multiple different secured doors until they reached their cells. He said that it was literally impossible to escape the place.
40. He said that each time they were transferred they were subjected to a full medical examination. Although my husband denied being physically tortured in other ways he said that he heard the echoing screams of detainees being tortured during the night. He recalls one of his cellmate’s being taken during the night and then beaten until he was bloody and bruised and then dumped back into the cell the next morning. He said that this cellmate’s crime was also that he had travelled abroad.
41. The psychological torture didn’t stop even after my husband had been released as he was still being harassed by police officers. They told him he was on probation for

6 months and had to come into the police station every day to show himself to them and to sign a document. After the ordeal my husband had went through he made sure to comply with them and never missed a signature. When I arrived in Urumqi in July 2019 my husband had to ask permission from police officials if he could go to the airport. He was accompanied by a Hui police officer for the first few days that I was in Urumqi. After that my husband frequently received phone calls and video calls from police and he was also called into weekly meetings. My husband was constantly living on edge wondering if he would be taken away again. In order to show the police officers that he was a changed man my husband remained obedient and did whatever they asked of him.

42. It was during this time in 2019 that I realized it was true, Uyghurs were actually being released from the concentration camps. I witnessed so many other families being reunited with their loved ones. Others who weren't fully released were being allowed to come home every week. Luckily, my husband was never taken to a forced labour camp, but I knew of Uyghurs in our community who were working in these camps. Some of them were allowed to come home for a visit at the end of the week but there were others who had disappeared in these camps and never heard of again. Literally everyone you spoke to had someone or knew someone who had been taken away to a concentration camp.

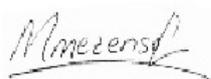
43. I was able to stay in Urumqi for another 6 months with him and then my visa expired. and I didn't have a choice, I had to come back to Australia. During this time my husband and I were keeping in touch through the Chinese app Wechat. We used to talk every day and then all of a sudden in May 2020 my husband stopped replying to my messages and then through his family I found out that he had been detained for a second time. Again, the reason for them detaining him was because he had travelled to Turkey. Again, the police were asking him questions about why he went to Turkey and what he was doing there. The second time he was detained for 3 months and then he was released at the end of August. He came back home and then not even 1 month after his release he was detained again for the third time. This time it was police from a different city, this time they came from Hami

city which is about 600km away from the capital city, and they detained my husband and they locked him up in a detention center in Hami.

44. Since September 2020 I have lost all contact with my husband. I haven't seen him or spoken to him since then. I found out through my contacts in Urumqi that on the 1st of April this year my husband got sentenced to 25 years in prison and basically, they said that my husband was involved in separatist activities when he was in Turkey. So that's the crime that he was suspected of, and he was sentenced to prison.

45. Although at first Uyghurs who travelled abroad and "religious" Uyghurs were being targeted, in order to meet their quota police officers started detaining Uyghurs without reason. After a short period of what seemed like freedom for the Uyghurs who were released it didn't last long for some of them as people started being rounded up and detained again in early 2020.

I have read and understood this witness statement and I confirm that I agree with its contents. I understand that this statement will be published on the Uyghur Tribunal website and will be available to the general public online.

Signature: 

Date: 24.08.2021