

Uyghur Tribunal – Fact Witness statement

UTFW2-069 – Abdusalam Muhammad

SUMMARY

This witness was imprisoned in a concentration camp after handing himself over to the Chinese police in 2014. He was subject to inhumane treatment including malnourishment, lack of hygiene, kept semi-naked in overcrowded cells and witness to torture. He was forced to memorise Chinese poetry every day at risk of severe punishment if they failed to do so. They were made to do unending reading praising the Communist Party and drafting articles admitting their wrongdoings. The witness states that this camp was worse than Nazi camps.

He also spent time in a training camp on release of the detention centre. He was still under constant surveillance from cameras. Religion was also restricted in the camps. The inmates were forced to run long distances and beaten if failed to do so. They had classes from 8-12, from 1-5 and again from 6-10pm. As he learnt that all his parents had been taken to the camp he stayed on as a chef in the training centre for many months after this.

He was allowed to leave briefly when his wife became ill in 2015. Much had changed since he was in the camps such as streets barricaded, new buildings and gates built. She was arrested not long after this and taken to a detention centre. He managed to escape in 2016 having started a restaurant in Hotan city.

Witness statement - Abdusalam Muhammad

1. Witness Abdusalam Muhammad testified about the process of his imprisonment in a concentration camp.
2. "My name is Abdusalam Muhammad, I was born in the village of Qoshirik, "Yakan" County, Kent 11, Fourth Village. I lived with my family there. After I graduated from elementary school, I went to the middle school in our town and I graduated from the middle school as an excellent student so I was selected as a teacher. In 1993, when I was 16, I became a teacher and I was in charge of the 5th grade for a year and a half. Then, I taught physical activities and the Chinese language to every student in the school. I did not want to work at the school so I quit. Since I had no income, I was having a tough time feeding my family. So, I decided to take cooking classes. During this time, I tried my best to become a professional chef. At the same time, my grandfather was the secretary and my father was the imam of a mosque. I was a non-smoker and a well-behaved young man. The head of the religious affairs of our village noticed me and reported everything to the police. The police came to our home and interrogated me or took me to the local police station very often which made us worry about our safety, especially mine so I moved to Hotan in 1997. Since I was a chef, I could make a living by cooking there.
3. Two years later in May of 1999, I got married in Hotan. Even though I wanted to go back to my hometown, I was still worried about the situation back in our town, and the pressure from the Chinese authorities. I was still threatened to be arrested along with other non-residents; therefore, I had to register myself as a resident of Hotan. I made my life by operating my small restaurant. Late In 2014, while I was working, I suffered a serious illness. To get better treatment in Urumqi, I had to have travel permission so I wrote to the local police, the village council, and the town council. I had to go to the doctor's office to get a doctor's notice and I had to have a green card to

get the permission. I left in September 2014; I was told that in November the Chinese government issued an arrest warrant for me. It was terrifying at that time, and the situation was very tense for all Uyghurs. Stories were spreading about being arrested and sentenced innocent Uyghurs; among them were business people, young intellectuals, patriotic (to our land East Turkistan) young men, businesspeople, and scholars. Uyghurs were horrified at that time, many people were arrested, tortured, and sentenced for 15-20 years for saying a word. China did not use what was called the rule of law; they arrested anyone they wanted. Thus, I decided to flee, but I had no chance to escape, and all East Turkestan was under Chinese state control, and there was no possibility of fleeing mainland China or going abroad. I thought myself innocent and I did not commit any crime so I handed myself over to the Chinese police on November 20, 2014, two police officers took me from Urumqi to Hotan. On November 25, 2014, I underwent a health check-up there, my head was shaved, I was ordered to take off my clothes, and then they took me to the detention center. In detention, I spent about 5-6 months there. I had witnessed many tragic scenarios and tortures; I have seen many people that were carried away in a state close to death. The situation was horrible and so was the food, the soup was very salty and had insects and worms in it. We were given green leaves most of the time. Some people passed out because of malnutrition. We were taken to the washroom once every 48 hours (about 2 days), but our legs were shackled, the legs of two men were tied together, and the time given to 16 to 20 people was 10 minutes. There was a bucket in one corner of our cell in case we needed to urinate in those 48 hours.

4. After entering the detention center, all our clothes were stripped off and, and we were half-naked and taken to a cell that was very small and very cold. We were freezing since we did not have any clothes on. There was no heating, and there was only one iron stick around an arm's length, and from that iron, heat passed through all the other cells so that no one would die, but we were freezing in it. The cell was 2.5 meters wide and 2.5m meters long and we were 16 people. There was not enough

room to sleep freely so we had lined up eight by eight, two of us (legs were shackled together) in one blanket, and the other two had to lie down the opposite way (their feet toward our heads). We could not move, if we did, we would freeze from the cold. Our feet were so cold, most of the night we had to stay awake. There was no cover for the bucket which we used as a toilet. We had to smell from the bucket day and night so we had runny noses or nasal infections. We were forced to memorize Chinese poetry every day, and those poems were so long that they were 2-3 sheets or sometimes 4-5 double-sided pages. If we could not memorize the poems, we were punished heavily. We must always sit upright on the ground if we move a little bit to relax, and they saw us on camera, they took us to the torture room where we lay on our backs and were beaten severely. If we moved our lips just a bit, the police thought we were reciting the Quran so we were tortured very badly. I witnessed 40-50 inmates being brutally tortured, they could not stand up. I heard with my ears, "I wish I was the one who was punished and died." In addition, every 48 hours, when we were in line for the washroom, the Han police stood where there was no camera and, they kicked us forcefully at our backs with hatred, we were not allowed to look back, we had to lower our heads; it was worse than the Nazi camps. We had seen Nazi camps in the movies before, they could talk to each other. We were not allowed to talk or whisper to each other or look at one another.

5. The name of the detention center was Hotan County Detention Center, next to the Hotan County transportation Commission. There was no food in the camp because there was no cook and all of them were Uyghur police officers. One day they asked us "is there any cook in here?" I went out and told them I was a chef and cooked food for them, and they liked my food. I also gave food to our brothers and sisters in the camp. They were happy that the old chef was relaxed, and even though it was difficult, we washed the vegetables before cooking. Before the worms and insects came out of our food every day, sometimes without salt, sometimes with too much salt. We improved the quality of the food, the inmates were happy too, and sometimes they

said thank you and tears filled their eyes as we handed the food inside. Since the kitchen was between the cell and the interrogation room, at the same time, we also saw that the police officers were interrogating our brothers and sisters. Some had been interrogated for more than 48 hours, turning on the high-pressure lamp without a meal and sleep and some of them were dragged somewhere else and still being beaten brutally while they were dragged.

6. This was not a matter of detaining and interrogating the perpetrators who had somehow committed a crime or of wrongdoing, but locking up the entire people who had Uyghur identity at those times. The camps were meant to detain Uyghurs, and then interrogate and torture them to the point of death, and they were about to die then transfer them to so-called re-education camps. On May 5, 2015, I was taken to a training camp. I was happy to be released from the Hotan County Detention Center. They said, "You are not guilty, you are innocent." I was incredibly happy. I asked could I go home. They replied "where is your home? There are still things to do before you go home" They made me sign a paper that said I was innocent. The police took me to a training camp in a police car. After transferring there, I saw that there were two posts on both sides, with the camera and surrounded by wires. When I entered, the inmates were standing for food, they gave me a bowl, and we went for a meal. After eating, I re-registered my name and they also asked me why I had been arrested and how long I had stayed. Then, I was assigned a room. The room was small and inside the room, cameras were installed so that they watch us day and night. The room is divided into three areas, with a separate door and a corridor with an iron door on the outside. A whistle blows to wake up in the morning; as soon as the whistle blows, we must clean up our beds and get ready for the washroom. The situation there was a bit better than in the camp but the police officers monitored us every single moment. We were restricted from praying or taking wudu (washing for prayer), any kinds of worship were forbidden. We were only allowed to wash our hands and faces. And then we were taken outside for a run. They called it a kind of exercise but it was another form

of torture. It was not a regular short run; it was a long and exceedingly difficult one. There were 70-year-old ladies, they could not run, even walking was difficult for them and sometimes they fell over or tripped over. At that moment, the police officers started to beat or kick old ladies so they stood up and ran again. Some young women could not run fast enough, and when they could not catch up or fell over, they were severely beaten. To avoid punishment, we had to run until our last breath. When running finished, we were ordered to clean up the floor. We were ordered to paint the floor thoroughly. If not, we got punished. After that, we were taken to breakfast where the line must be straight and we must be quiet. If not, we got verbal insults and beaten with thick sticks to our heads and everywhere on our bodies; we were treated like criminals. We ate our food sitting on the ground, heads down and quietly. It did not matter what size it was. After that, we were taken to the classroom, the class started at 8 a.m. until noon, and at noon we were dismissed for an hour; at 1 o'clock the class started again until 5 in the afternoon. The classes were from 7-8 different Chinese state agencies, they were called religious studies, political law, public issues, and the labour forces. But there was nothing about specific skills or professions. All of them were to teach that the Chinese invaders were very generous to the Uyghurs that they were doing their utmost, and the Uyghurs betrayed the Chinese communist party, and the Uyghurs should be thankful for the Chinese government. After that, we had a one-hour break.

7. From 6 pm - 10 pm, we were forced to study lessons about the types of illegal religious activities, types of extremism, and the quality of illegal elements were intertwined with those 70, 80, 50, 30 rules. If we could not learn fast enough, they threatened to take us to jail and we saw some people were sent to jail when they could not learn it. I stayed for 70 days (about 2 and a half months) studying there.
8. Although the training center looked a bit liberated, with little sun to clean up outside. In the camp, there was no sun, no air, and no toilets. There were sticks, verbal insults

and other things that were the same in the training center and the camp. There was no such thing as freedom to move around, no way to pray, and no way to recite the Qur'an or talk to someone. In the training center, we were taken outside to clean up, and we were forced to study outside in the extremely sweltering summer heat and some people were tied up under the sun for exceptionally long hours for punishment. Since the time we got there was in June-July, there were some young boys who passed out. We sat in an upright assigned area on the ground even though there was a classroom. Every day, we were ordered to do non-stop, unfinished reading, praising the Communist Party, drafting articles every 4 days. In it, we had to admit what we had done wrong (although we did not do anything wrong) and thank the Communist Party for showing us the right path, praising the Communist Party for giving us everything we needed, condemning ourselves for not being loyal to it, and admitting Xinjiang (East Turkistan) has been an inseparable part of China for a long history. All of them were only brainwashing, renouncing our Uyghur identity, and studying distorted history.

9. I was about to graduate from the training center after spending 70 days there and there was a meeting with my family. During the meeting, I learnt that all parents were taken to the camps and the police started arresting Uyghurs who had been released before; therefore, the situation was not safe for me or anyone. I was very distressed not knowing what to do, where to go. Even if they sent me home, there was a huge risk that they would rearrest me.

10. I was about to leave and some people said: "Why don't you cook for us? Your food is okay" I had cooked for them several times before and the staff in the office asked me "Are you a chef?" I said "Yes, I am a chef" so they told me to work for them as a cook since then I have worked in the training center as a cook for 6-7 months. I witnessed all Uyghurs who were brought there without any crime or wrongdoing.

11. In November 2015, my wife had serious heart issues. I told them my wife's sickness, asked them to give me permission to go home and I promised them that I would come in again. I was allowed to go. I went outside, and the whole street was barricaded with iron bars. By the time I got out of the detention center, a lot of big buildings had been built and there were tables and chairs in all the rooms. I knew what happened, there were two groups of people who had already been arrested before me. The police officers arrested so many Uyghurs from the villages, towns, and city centers including the ordinary public, imams, secretaries of mosques, anyone who had religious knowledge even though they did not do anything wrong. The two big detention centers in Hotan County were full. The former two groups were trained for one month. We were the third group and from us, the training time changed to 70 days. After we completed 70 days, those who followed us also trained for 70 days. After this, the training time changed to 120 days (about 4 months). I repeated 120 days three times. In there I worked as a cook for all inmates for 8-9 sessions. They changed the training time from 30 days (about four and a half weeks), 70 days, then 120 days, and that was what I saw then.

12. I was there when my wife's condition worsened and she had a heart attack. I asked to go home to see my wife and I asked for a letter of approval. In the training center, I worked extremely hard and I always tried to cook better food so the police were satisfied with my job and permitted me to visit my wife. Eventually, they gave me a letter in which I was their cook and I would come back soon.

13. When I came out, I saw that the gates were in all streets; Whole communities were locked with iron gates and cameras were installed everywhere. After I came home, I was going to take my wife to the hospital by bus. My wife had left home a little bit earlier than me, the police arrested her on the street where the bus station was. The main reason for arresting her was that she wore a scarf and tied it under her chin which was not permitted. So many women (30, 40, 50 or even 60 years old) were beaten and

dragged into police cars and brought to the camps for the same reason (wearing scarves under their chin). And some other women were arrested for wearing longer skirts. Before arresting the ladies, the police officers brutally beat the ladies saying "Don't you know that it's forbidden to wear a long skirt or dress or wearing a scarf?" I told my wife that we had to be incredibly careful, for her to try to not wear long outfits or cover her face too much.

14. I desperately looked for my wife at all nearby police stations in Hotan County but I could not locate her. Finally, someone from the town office (working for the police) asked me why she was arrested. I told them that she wore her scarf under her chin and we did not know which a crime was but they did not listen to me.

15. I located my wife in a temporary detention center which was converted from a town political- law office. My wife was sick when I saw her, her eyes were full of tears, and we could see each other through the iron gate once a day and I saw other 50-60 mothers, they were not given any food so we had to deliver every day. Their situation was very desperate. They were forced to dance all day and they were not allowed to do anything freely, even they were monitored while using the washrooms.

16. My wife's sickness worsened day by day and I had to find a way to take her out and treat her illness; therefore, I went to the secretary of the political- law office to give her permission to go to the hospital. In the beginning, he was reluctant but later he gave his approval, then I took my wife to the hospital and she was treated there for 2-3 months.

17. Arrests started again, everyone was in panic and distress on top of that I had to feed my family so I decided to move to Hotan city and open a restaurant and managed to relocate to Hotan city. I got permission from various levels of officials to open a restaurant in Hotan city. In 2016 managed to get passports for all my family and

managed to escape from the Chinese regime. I left our country in April 2016. My wife came 15 days (about 2 weeks) later. We had to leave everything behind. When I was transferred from camp (also called detention center) to training center (also called re-education center), we were told that we were session 3 close to session 4. The previous session (training period) was for a month. They were imams in the village mosque, religious elderly people, scholars, and other Uyghurs. I was in session 4 and stayed for 70 days. Later the time was changed to 120 days.

18. The family members of the detainees had to pay for food and clothing. If families did not have money, they had to sell their sheep, goats, or cows. While the police were taking Uyghurs to the camp, the family had to give 1200- 1500 Chinese yuan for food and clothing. The clothing was a prison jumpsuit. The food was a steamed bun and rice, nothing else.

19. The camps started in January or February 2015 but not in 2016. I was taken to a camp in May 2015 and I was in session 3. Before me there were 2 sessions, they had already finished. I finished July around 15 -20, 2015 and I worked as a cook. After I was working there for 2 months, I was transferred to another huge training center called Layqa Village training center which was converted from a huge historical school. There were around 150 Uyghurs and I worked as a cook there for 7 months. There were 5 chefs altogether.

20. There were two huge training centers in Hotan County's city center but every town and every village had training centers. We were about to finish training, and we were brought to the centers. We saw around 70-80 Uyghurs in one hall studying intensely. They were sleeping on blankets. I saw them with my own eyes. What I am talking about is the actual history I have been through, and I may have forgotten a lot of it, but what I am saying is true, that is what I have seen and witnessed."

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: Abdusalam Muhammad

Date: 26-08-2021

(Handwritten signature available on pdf version)