

Witness Statement

Mihrigul Tursun

1. My name is Mihrigul Tursun and I was born in 1989 in Cherchen County, in Southern Xinjiang. I am of Uyghur ethnicity. When I was twelve years old, I was taken to Guangzhou for middle school, under the government's assimilation programme to move Uyghur children to inner China at a young age. The purpose is to immerse Uyghur children in Han Chinese institutions, far from their language and cultural environment so they embrace the Chinese way of life. Personally, this experience only made me more conscious of my ethnic identity. The constant discrimination and humiliation I experienced as a young Uyghur in a Chinese school in a Chinese city made me realise that I was different from the majority Han population. After studying economics at Guangzhou University and working for a private company that does business with Arab countries, I enrolled in December 2011 in the British University in Egypt to study business administration in Arabic, where I met my husband. In March 2015, I gave birth to healthy triplets, two boys and a girl, who are Egyptian citizens. It was difficult taking care of my three babies and my parents insisted I came back, so on 13th May 2015 I left for China with my three two-month-old triplets to seek help from my parents.
2. Upon arriving to border control at Urumqi airport, I was taken to a room for questioning and my babies were taken away from me. The authorities repeatedly asked me who I met and talked to in Egypt. They then handcuffed me, scotch taped my mouth, placed a black hood over my head. As they pushed me when I was getting on the police car, my nose broke and I lost a lot of blood. They took me to the basement of a detention centre. I saw many foreigners through the iron fences. They learnt that I spoke Arabic, so ordered me to act as a translator for a Malaysian lady. Her band was Uyghur who had already been detained. When the lady said that the Malaysian embassy would get involved, they beat her very hard and said the embassy could get involved only if she could come out alive from there. They said that this was China and they could do whatever they wanted according to the local law. They interrogated me for three days and nights. Then they put me in a completely dark room for seven days. After that, they took me to the cell upstairs. There were about thirty women. We ate steamed bun and boiled rice. We had to sing red songs and read Chinese books. Some women were there just for having more children than allowed or having their ID cards expired.
3. One day in July, I was told that I had been paroled because my children were sick. They told me that I could stay with them until they got better but warned me that I was still under investigation. They kept my passport, ID card and mobile phone. I went straight 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. I was not allowed to go near him. The next day, the doctors told me

that my son was dead. They said he died due to health complication and they gave me his dead body. I noticed that all my three babies had been operated on their neck area while I was in prison. I was told they had been fed through a tube which went through their neck since they could not eat. I did not understand this. I had been breastfeeding without any issues back in Egypt. My other two children had developed health complications and I spent the next few months seeking medical treatment, including an eye surgery for my daughter. I was not able to return to Egypt because all my documents had been confiscated by the authorities. I had also apparently been blacklisted: my ID card beeped wherever I used it, even in a hospital, pharmacy or on the bus, so the police would check my identity and had to approve every step I took.

4. In April 2017, I was at my parent's home in Cherchen county when the police came to detain me for the second time. They took me to the Security Bureau of Cherchen county. I was interrogated for three days and nights. They would always ask me the same questions: "*Who do you know overseas? Who are you close to? Which organisation do you work for?*" I think that because I lived overseas and speak a few foreign languages, they tried to label me as a spy. My mouth and nose would bleed from their beatings. They slapped me so hard that I lost hearing of my right ear. They gave me drugs twice, and they checked my mouth with their fingers to make sure I swallowed them. I felt lethargic, less conscious, and I lost my appetite after taking the drugs. They interrogated me in this condition. They showed me the other rooms, where they were threatening two completely naked women with police dog. I was scared to death. They took me then to the county hospital for check-ups. They did blood, urine, X-ray, Ultra-sound etc tests. In the basement, they put me in a computerised machine fully naked. They did a vagina test, which caused an extreme pain. Since then, my period stopped for seven months.
5. Then, they took me to the camp, where one female and two male officials examined my body while I was still naked, then they shaved my head and then dressed me in a blue prison uniform. It had the number 54 written on it. An official told me that this outfit is usually worn by serious criminals, those who face capital punishment or life imprisonment, and that "54" also means "I am dead" in Chinese. I was very scared, and I thought I would die in this place.
6. After that, they took me to an underground cell with no windows. There was an iron gate and the door opened electronically through a computerised lock system. There was only a small hole in the ceiling for ventilation, and we were never taken outside for fresh air. When the police opened the door, they would cover their noses. There was a toilet bowl in the corner, out in the open and without toilet paper. There were cameras on all sides so the agents could see every corner of the room, including the toilet area. There was one light which was always on. There were around forty people kept in a forty square metre cell so, at night, ten to fifteen women would stand up while the rest would sleep on our side so that we could fit. Then we would rotate every two hours. There were people there who had not taken a shower for over a year. The first night was very difficult. As I was crammed on the floor with all these women, with chains on my wrists and ankles, I was thinking about what I did wrong. Why

was I here without any charges or explanations? What crime did I commit? Why did I deserve such inhumane treatment?

7. Each morning, we would be woken up at 5am with loud alarms. We had to fold the six blankets we were sharing. If the blankets were not folded neatly and not looking symmetrical, the whole cell would be punished: they would take away the blankets and we would have to sleep on the cement floor. Before we ate our breakfast, which was water with very little rice, we had to sing songs hailing the Chinese Communist 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 seven days to memorise the rules of the camp and fourteen days to memorise all the lines in a book on Communist ideology. The women whose voice were weak, or who could not sing the songs in Chinese, or remember the specific rules of the camp were denied food or beaten up. We should say “state language” instead of “Han language”, otherwise, we would be slapped and denied food. In theory, we were supposed to receive three meals a day. The lunch was a steam bun, but sometimes there was no food at all. For supper, we would have either another steamed bun or cooked rice. The steamed buns were getting smaller and smaller as the number of people detained kept increasing. They were not freshly cooked, rather expired and hard. The guards would throw them on the ground instead of giving them in our hands. We were never given any fruit or vegetable.
8. We were also forced to take unknown pills and drink some kind of white liquid. The pill would cause us to lose consciousness and would reduce our cognition level. The white liquid seemed to stop women’s periods, though for some it caused extreme bleeding, and even death. Since we were never given water, we quenched our thirst when we took these medicines, caring less if we would die or not by taking them.
9. When I had first entered the cell, which was cell number 210, there were forty other women, aged between seventeen and sixty-two. It got more and more crowded in the cell: there were sixty-eight women when I left, after three months. I knew most of the women in my cell. They were neighbours, daughters of my former teachers, and doctors, including one who had been educated in the United Kingdom and who had treated me in the past. They were mostly well-educated professionals.
10. The most horrific days for me were when I would witness the suffering and death of cellmates. The nights were the busiest time in the camps: a lot of activities such as transfers of people between cells or removals of dead bodies would happen at night. In the silence of the night, we would sometimes hear men from other cells groan in agony. We would hear beatings, men screaming, and people being dragged in the hallways, as the chains on their wrists and ankles would make terrible noise on the floor. The idea that these men could be our fathers or brothers was unbearable. I witnessed nine deaths in my cell during those three months. If my small cell, number 210, in a small county, could see nine deaths in three months, I cannot imagine how many deaths must have occurred all over the region. Due to these shocks, I started to have seizures, which I had never experienced before.

11. One victim was a sixty-two-year-old woman named Gulnisa. She had red rashes all over her body, her hands would tremble, and she could not eat anything. She seemed really sick but the doctors in the camp determined that she was fine. The doctors were supposed to say this, because if they said an inmate was sick, they would be perceived as sympathetic or supportive of their patients. One night, Gulnisa was humiliated for not having memorised her lines in Chinese and she was crying as she went to sleep. She did not snore that night. Her body was cold when we tried to wake her up the next morning. She had died in her sleep.
12. There was another woman, called Patemhan. She was twenty-three-year-old. Her mother had died, and her husband, father and brother were all taken to camps. Her crime was attending a wedding in 2014 held according to Islamic traditions, so there was no dancing, singing, or drinking alcohol. She said that all of the four-hundred people who attended that wedding were arrested and taken to camps. When she was taken to the camp, she had left her two children in the backyard. She had spent a year and three months in the camp, and she agonised every day over the whereabouts of her children. She had a bleeding for over a month but was denied medical treatment. One night, while she was standing with other women, she suddenly collapsed and stopped breathing. Several people with masks came. They dragged her by her feet and took her away.
13. In the camp, once every week or ten days, they took us for interrogation. The last time, I was taken to a special room with an electric chair, known as the "tiger chair." It had only one light and one chair. There were belts and whips hanging on the wall. I was placed in the chair, with my arms and legs locked in place and tightened by the pressing of a button. A helmet-like thing was put 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 any more of this and I begged them to kill me. They would insult me with humiliating words and pressure me to admit my guilt, even though I had never been involved in any political activity when I was abroad. They would attack me psychologically by saying: *"Your mom died the other day, and your dad will serve a lifetime in prison. Your son was in the hospital and he died as well. Your daughter's eyes will remain crossed permanently and she will be thrown in the street because you cannot take care of her. Your family is torn apart."* This was very hard for me. I felt a huge sense of guilt and worthlessness. I cried and begged them to kill me. The last words I remember them saying was: *"Being Uyghur is a crime,"* and I fainted. When I came to myself, I found that they brought me back to the cell. Having seen all these atrocities around me, suffering from the extreme pain after the torture, especially I couldn't bare the death of Patemhan, on the same day, June 9, I passed out again.
14. When I came to myself, I found myself in a psychiatric hospital in Urumqi. My right hand and left foot were chained to the bed. Later, my father and two policemen took me to Cherchen. Until I got a little better, two policemen stayed at our home seven days, 24 hours. They would be replaced once a week. They slept and

ate with us. When my father was not at home, they would sexually harass me and my mother. We tried everything to keep my father at home.

15. In November 2017, I was detained for the third time and taken to a place like a prison. They gave me a yellow uniform and told me that I had got the sentence. They gave me pen and paper to write down my will. They said I had three choices, dying of drug, or rope or bullet. For the latter I had to pay 1800 Yuan, the price of three bullets. I was alone in the cell. Then they moved me to two other camps, where I saw women who had got injured hands due to forced labour.
16. After all this torture and suffering, I never thought I would come out alive. I still cannot believe it. Two hours before being told I would be released, I was given an unknown injection. I was very scared; I thought the shot would slowly kill me. I was surprised to still be alive when the authorities gave me a statement to read and sign. I read it and swore to it as they filmed me. 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."* I was warned that I must return to China after taking my kids to Egypt, and that I must remember that my parents, siblings, and other relatives were at the mercy of the authorities.
17. On 5th April 2018, after more than three months, I came out of the cell and I was able to finally see my kids. I did not see my parents and was not allowed to ask about their whereabouts. I left my hometown three days later with my two children. I stayed in Beijing for about twenty days since I was denied boarding the plane three times because of allegedly missing documents. On my fourth attempt, I was able to board the plane and I landed in Cairo on 28th April. I was lost and in pain. I did not know what to do. My parents and siblings could be in camps, and the authorities could kill them if I did not return to China, but if I did return, I would go back to die in a camp. The Chinese authorities could still keep my family in the camps or kill them. In the end, I gathered my courage and decided to tell the world about China's hidden concentration camps, so that those people who tortured me and all the others would be punished for what they have done.
18. I was finally able to come to the United States and landed in Virginia on 21st September 2018. I was very confused and yet overwhelmed with joy that day. I now live in the United States with my two kids. My life is still haunted by sudden episodes of fear and anxiety. My children have physical and psychological health issues. They get scared when someone knocks on the door and they are afraid of being separated from me. My body still shows the scars from the constant beatings and the pain in my wrists and ankles from wearing the chains. I cannot hear in my right ear because of the heavy beatings I received. I fear the dark, but also too much light or noise. Police sirens give me anxiety and cause my heartbeat to increase. Sometimes, I get shortness of breath, my 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, take me away and kill me. I also fear that the Chinese

authorities are still monitoring me. Once, a group of Chinese men followed me outside and continued to follow after I got into a car.

19. I think the Chinese government 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 now and denounce all the things you said about the Chinese government in the interviews you gave to Radio Free Asia, and tell them you love China. Tell them you were pressured by the Uyghur organisations in the United States 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. Today I am still scared that they will try to hurt me.

I have read and understood this witness statement and I confirm that I agree with its contents.

April 9, 2021