

‘Their Goal Is To Destroy Everyone’: Uyghur Camp Detainees Allege Systematic Rape



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Women in China's "re-education" camps for Uyghurs have been systematically raped, sexually abused, and tortured, according to detailed new accounts obtained by the BBC.

You may find some of the details in this story distressing.



The men always wore masks, Tursunay Ziawudun said, even though there was no pandemic then.

They wore suits, she said, not police uniforms.

Sometime after midnight, they came to the cells to select the women they wanted and took them down the corridor to a "black room", where there were no surveillance cameras.

Several nights, Ziawudun said, they took her.

"Perhaps this is the most unforgettable scar on me forever," she said.

"I don't even want these words to spill from my mouth."

Tursunay Ziawudun spent nine months inside China's vast and secretive system of internment camps in the Xinjiang region. According to independent estimates, more than a million men and women have been detained in the sprawling network of camps, which China says exist for the "re-education" of the Uyghurs and other minorities.

Human rights groups say the Chinese government has gradually stripped away the religious and other freedoms of the Uyghurs, culminating in an oppressive system of mass surveillance, detention, indoctrination, and even forced sterilisation.

The policy flows from China's President, Xi Jinping, who visited Xinjiang in 2014 in the wake of a terror attack by Uighur separatists. Shortly after, according to documents leaked to the New York Times, he directed local officials to respond with "absolutely no mercy". The US government said last month that China's actions since amounted to a genocide. China says reports of mass detention and forced sterilisation are "lies and absurd allegations".

First-hand accounts from inside the internment camps are rare, but several former detainees and a guard have told the BBC they experienced or saw evidence of an organised system of mass rape, sexual abuse and torture.



Tursunay Ziawudun spent nine months inside China's network of internment camps

Tursunay Ziawudun, who fled Xinjiang after her release and is now in the US, said women were removed from the cells "every night" and raped by one or more masked Chinese men. She said she was tortured and later gang-raped on three occasions, each time by two or three men.

Ziawudun has spoken to the media before, but only from Kazakhstan, where she "lived in constant fear of being sent back to China", she said. She said she believed that if she revealed the extent of the sexual abuse she had experienced and seen, and was returned to Xinjiang, she would be punished more harshly than before. And she was ashamed, she said.

It is impossible to verify Ziawudun's account completely because of the severe restrictions China places on reporters in the country, but travel documents and immigration records she provided to the BBC corroborate the timeline of her story. Her descriptions of the camp in Xinyuan county - known in Uyghur

as Kunes county - match satellite imagery analysed by the BBC, and her descriptions of daily life inside the camp, as well as the nature and methods of the abuse, correspond with other accounts from former detainees.

Internal documents from the Kunes county justice system from 2017 and 2018, provided to the BBC by Adrian Zenz, a leading expert on China's policies in Xinjiang, detail planning and spending for "transformation through education" of "key groups" - a common euphemism in China for the indoctrination of the Uyghurs. In one Kunes document, the "education" process is described as "washing brains, cleansing hearts, strengthening righteousness and eliminating evil".

The BBC also interviewed a Kazakh woman from Xinjiang who was detained for 18 months in the camp system, who said she was forced to strip Uyghur women naked and handcuff them, before leaving them

alone with Chinese men. Afterwards, she cleaned the rooms, she said.

"My job was to remove their clothes above the waist and handcuff them so they cannot move," said Gulzira Auelkhan, crossing her wrists behind her head to demonstrate. "Then I would leave the women in the room and a man would enter - some Chinese man from outside or policeman. I sat silently next to the door, and when the man left the room I took the woman for a shower."

The Chinese men "would pay money to have their pick of the prettiest young inmates", she said.

Some former detainees of the camps have described being forced to assist guards or face punishment. Auelkhan said she was powerless to resist or intervene. Asked if there was a system of organised rape, she said: "Yes, rape."

"They forced me to go into that room," she said. "They forced me to take off those women's clothes and to restrain their hands and leave the room."

Some of the women who were taken away from the cells at night were never returned, Ziawudun said. Those who were brought back were threatened against telling others in the cell what had happened to them.

You can't tell anyone what happened, you can only lie down quietly," she said. "It is designed to destroy everyone's spirit."

Mr Zenz told the BBC that the testimony gathered for this story was "some of the most horrendous evidence I have seen since the atrocity began".

"This confirms the very worst of what we have heard before," he said. "It provides authoritative and detailed evidence of sexual abuse and torture at a level clearly greater than what we had assumed."

The Uyghurs are a mostly Muslim Turkic minority group that number about 11 million in Xinjiang in north-western China. The region borders Kazakhstan and is also home to ethnic Kazakhs. Ziawudun, who is 42, is Uighur. Her husband is a Kazakh.

The couple returned to Xinjiang in late 2016 after a five-year stay in Kazakhstan, and were interrogated on arrival and had their passports confiscated, Ziawudun said. A few months later, she was told by police to attend a meeting alongside other Uighurs and Kazakhs and the group was rounded up and detained.

Her first stint in detention was comparatively easy, she said, with decent food and access to her phone. After a month she developed stomach ulcers and was released. Her husband's passport was returned and he went back to Kazakhstan to work, but authorities kept Ziawudun's, trap

"ping her in Xinjiang. Reports suggest China has purposefully kept behind and interned relatives to discourage those who leave from speaking out.



Tursunay Ziawudun was able to flee to Kazakhstan, and then on to relative safety in the US

On 9 March 2018, with her husband still in Kazakhstan, Ziawudun was instructed to report to a local police station, she said. She was told she needed “more education”.

According to her account, Ziawudun was transported back to the same facility as her previous detention, in Kunes county, but the site had been significantly developed, she said. Buses were lined up outside offloading new detainees “non-stop”.

The women had their jewellery confiscated. Ziawudun’s earrings were yanked out, she said, causing her ears to bleed, and she was herded into a room with a group of women. Among them was an elderly woman who Ziawudun would later befriend.

The camp guards pulled off the woman’s headscarf, Ziawudun said, and shouted at her for wearing a long dress - one of a list of religious expressions that became arrestable offences for Uighurs that year.

“They stripped everything off the elderly lady, leaving her with just her underwear. She was so embarrassed that she tried to cover herself with her arms,” Ziawudun said.

“I cried so much watching the way they treated her. Her tears fell like rain.”

The women were told to hand over their shoes and any clothes with elastic or buttons, Ziawudun said, then taken to cellblocks - “similar to a small Chinese neigh-



Gulzira Auelkhan makes tea at home in her village. She was detained for 18 months

bourhood where there are rows of buildings”.

Nothing much happened for the first month or two. They were forced to watch propaganda programmes in their cells and had their hair forcibly



cut short.

Then police began interrogating Ziawudun about her absent husband, she said, knocking her on the floor when she resisted and kicking her in the abdomen.

“Police boots are very hard and heavy, so at first I thought he was beating me with something,” she said. “Then I realised that he was trampling on my belly. I almost passed out - I felt a hot flush go through me.”

A camp doctor told her she might have a blood clot. When her cellmates drew attention to the fact that she was bleeding, the guards “replied saying it is normal for women to bleed”, she said.

According to Ziawudun, each cell was home to 14 women, with bunk beds, bars on the windows, a basin and a hole-in-the-floor-style toilet. When she first saw women being taken out of the cell at night, she didn’t understand why, she said. She thought they were being moved elsewhere.

Then sometime in May 2018 - “I don’t remember the exact date, because you don’t remember the dates inside there” - Ziawudun and a cellmate, a woman in her twenties, were taken out at night and presented to a Chinese man in a mask, she said. Her cellmate was taken into a separate room.

“As soon as she went inside she started screaming,” Ziawudun said. “I don’t know how to explain to you, I thought they were torturing her. I never thought about them raping.”

The woman who had brought them from the cells told the men about Ziawudun’s recent bleeding.

“After the woman spoke about my condition, the Chinese man swore at her. The man with the mask said ‘Take her to the dark room’.

“The woman took me to the room next to where the other girl had been taken in. They had an electric stick, I didn’t know what it was, and it was pushed inside my genital tract, torturing me with an electric



Ziawudun identified this site - listed as a school - as the location where she was held. Satellite images from 2017 (left) and 2019 (right) show significant development typical of camps, with what look like dormitory and factory buildings

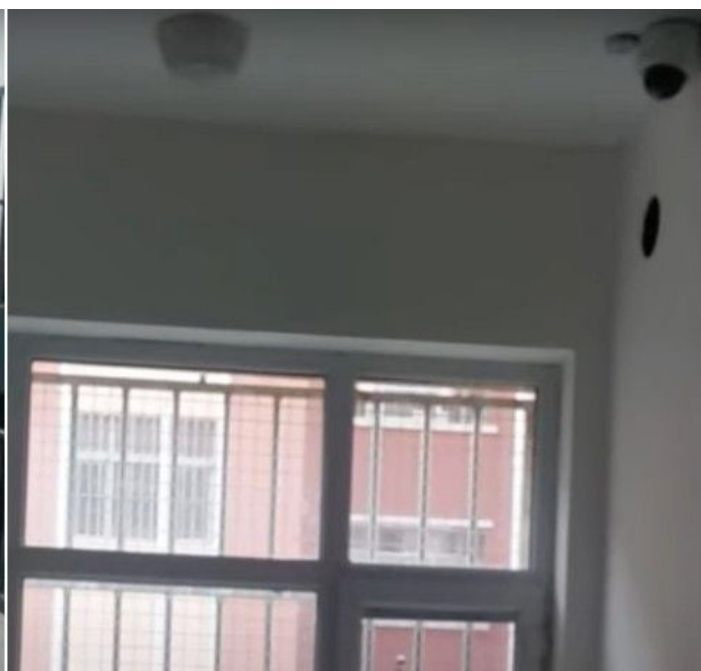
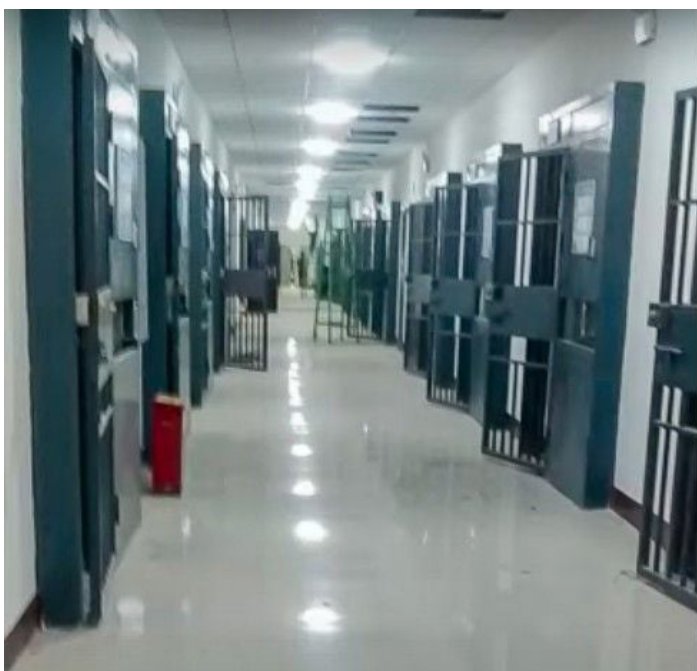
shock.”

Ziawudun’s torture that first night in the dark room eventually came to an end, she said, when the woman intervened again citing her medical condition, and she was returned to the cell.

About an hour later, her cellmate was brought back. “The girl became completely different after that, she wouldn’t speak to anyone, she sat quietly staring as if in a trance,” Ziawudun said. “There were many people in those cells who lost their minds.”

Alongside cells, another central feature of the camps is classrooms. Teachers have been drafted in to “re-educate” the detainees - a process activists say is designed to strip the Uyghurs and other minorities of their culture, language and religion, and indoctrinate them into mainstream Chinese culture.

Qelbinur Sedik, an Uzbek woman from Xinjiang, was among the Chinese language teachers brought into the camps and coerced into giving lessons to the detainees. Sedik has since fled China and spoken public-



Secret filming obtained by the Bitter Winter activist group showed cells with bars and cameras

ly about her experience.

The women’s camp was “tightly controlled”, Sedik told the BBC. But she heard stories, she said - signs and rumours of rape. One day, Sedik cautiously approached a Chinese camp policewoman she knew.

“I asked her, ‘I have been hearing some terrible stories about rape, do you know about it?’ She said we should talk in the courtyard during lunch.

“So I went to the courtyard, where there were not many cameras. She said, ‘Yes, the rape has become a culture. It is



Gulzira Auelkhan, centre, at home in her village. She was forced to restrain women in the camps, she said

gang rape and the Chinese police not only rape them but also electrocute them. They are subject to horrific torture.”

That night Sedik didn't sleep at all, she said. "I was thinking about my daughter who was studying abroad and I cried all night."

In separate testimony to the Uyghur Human Rights Project, Sedik said she heard about an electrified stick being inserted into women to torture them - echoing the experience Ziawudun described.

There were "four kinds of electric shock", Sedik said - "the chair, the glove, the helmet, and anal rape with a stick".

"The screams echoed throughout the building," she said. "I could hear them during lunch and sometimes when I was in class."

Another teacher forced to work in the camps, Sayragul Sauytbay, told the BBC that "rape was common" and the guards "picked the girls and young women they wanted and took them away".

She described witnessing a harrowing public gang rape of a woman of just 20 or 21, who was brought before about 100 other detainees to make a forced confession.

"After that, in front of everyone, the police took turns to rape her," Sauytbay said.

"While carrying out this test, they watched people closely and picked out anyone who resisted, clenched their fists, closed their eyes, or looked away, and took them for punishment."

The young woman cried out for help, Sauytbay said. "It was absolutely horrendous," she said. "I felt I had died. I was dead."

In the camp in Kunes, Ziawudun's days drifted into weeks and then months. The detainees' hair was cut, they went to class, they underwent unexplained medical tests, took pills, and were forcibly injected every 15 days with a "vaccine" that brought on nausea and numbness.

Women were forcibly fitted with IUDs or sterilised, Ziawudun said, including a woman who was just about 20 years old. ("We begged them on her behalf," she said.) Forced sterilisation of Uyghurs has been wi-



Sayragul Sauytbay, a teacher, said she witnessed a harrowing rape. She was later accused of crossing illegally into Kazakhstan

despread in Xinjiang, according to a recent investigation by the Associated Press. The Chinese government told the BBC the allegations were "completely unfounded".

As well as the medical interventions, detainees in Ziawudun's camp spent hours singing patriotic Chinese songs and watching patriotic TV programmes about Chinese President Xi Jinping, she said.

"You forget to think about life outside the camp. I don't know if they brainwashed us or if it was the side effect of the injections and pills, but you can't think of anything beyond wishing you had a full stomach. The food deprivation is so severe."

Detainees had food withheld for infractions such as failing to accurately memorise passages from books about Xi Jinping, according to a former camp guard who spoke to the BBC via video link from a country outside China.

"Once we were taking the people arrested into the concentration camp, and I saw everyone being forced to memorise those books. They sit for hours trying to memorise the text, everyone had a book in their hands," he said.

Those who failed tests were forced to wear three different colours of clothing based on whether they had failed one, two, or three times, he said, and subjected to different levels of punishment accordingly, including food deprivation and beatings.



Ziawudun broke down in tears as she identified footage and images of the camps

"It is very centralised and it goes to the very top," Parton said. "There is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that this is Xi Jinping's policy."

It was unlikely that Xi or other top party officials would have directed or authorised rape or torture, Parton said, but they would "certainly be aware of it".

"I think they prefer at the top just to turn a blind

"I entered those camps. I took detainees into those camps," he said. "I saw those sick, miserable people. They definitely experienced various types of torture. I am sure about that."

It was not possible to independently verify the guard's testimony but he provided documents that appeared to corroborate a period of employment at a known camp. He agreed to speak on condition of anonymity.

The guard said he did not know anything about rape in the cell areas. Asked if the camp guards used electrocution, he said: "Yes. They do. They use those electrocuting instruments." After being tortured, detainees were forced to make confessions to a variety of perceived offences, according to the guard. "I have those confessions in my heart," he said.

President Xi looms large over the camps. His image and slogans adorn the walls; he is a focus of the programme of "re-education". Xi is the overall architect of the policy against the Uighurs, said Charles Parton, a former British diplomat in China and now senior associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute.

eye. The line has gone out to implement this policy with great sternness, and that is what is happening." That left "no real constraints", he said. "I just don't see what the perpetrators of these acts would have to hold them back."

According to Ziawudun's account, the perpetrators did not hold back.

"They don't only rape but also bite all over your body, you don't know if they are human or animal," she said, pressing a tissue to her eyes to stop her tears and pausing for a long time to collect herself.

"They didn't spare any part of the body, they bit everywhere leaving horrible marks. It was disgusting to look at.

"I've experienced that three times. And it is not just one person who torments you, not just one predator. Each time they were two or three men."

Later, a woman who slept near Ziawudun in the cell, who said she was detained for giving birth to too many children, disappeared for three days and when she returned her body was covered with the same marks, Ziawudun said.

"She couldn't say it. She wrapped her arms around my neck and sobbed continuously, but she said no-

thing.”

The Chinese government did not respond directly to questions from the BBC about allegations of rape and torture. In a statement, a spokeswoman said the camps in Xinjiang were not detention camps but “vocational education and training centres”.

“The Chinese government protects the rights and interests of all ethnic minorities equally,” the spokeswoman said, adding that the government “attaches great importance to protecting women’s rights”. Ziawudun was released in December 2018 along with others who had spouses or relatives in Kazakhstan - an apparent policy shift she still doesn’t fully understand.

The state returned her passport and she fled to Kazakhstan and then, with the support of the Uyghur Human Rights Project, to the US. She is applying to stay. She lives in a quiet suburb not far from Washington DC with a landlady from the local Uyghur community. The two women cook together and take walks in the streets around the house. It’s a slow, uneventful existence. Ziawudun keeps the lights low when she is in the house, because they shone brightly and constantly in the camp. A week after she arrived in the US, she had surgery to remove her womb - a consequence of being stamped on. “I have lost the chance to become a mother,” she said. She wants her husband to join her in the US. For now, he is in Kazakhstan.



Tursunay Ziawudun at home in the US with her landlady, who supports her

For a while after her release, before she could flee, Ziawudun waited in Xinjiang. She saw others who had been churned through the system and released. She saw the effect the policy was having on her people. The birth rate in Xinjiang has plummeted in the past few years, according to independent research - an effect analysts have described as “demographic genocide”.

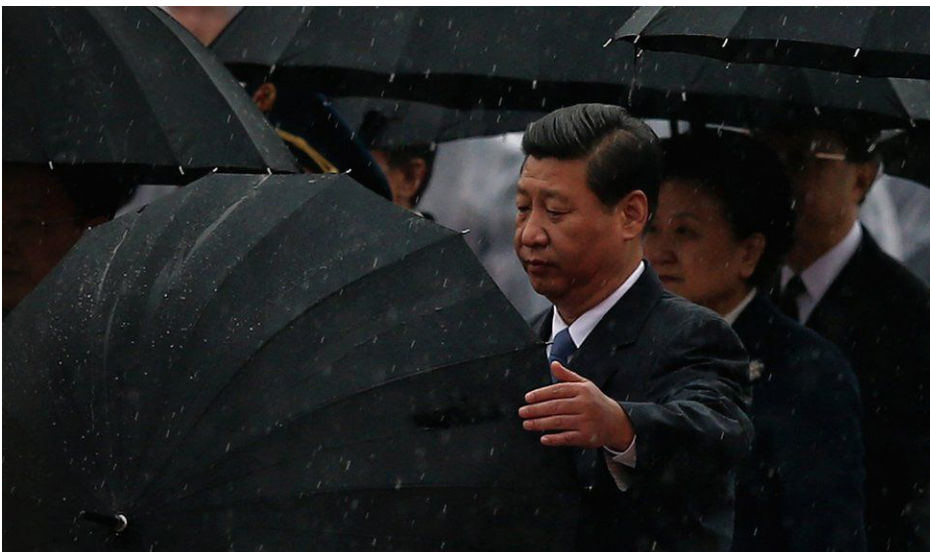
Many in the community had turned to alcohol, Ziawudun said. Several times, she saw her former cellmate collapsed on the street - the young woman who was removed from the cell with her that first night, who she heard screaming in an adjacent room. The woman had been consumed by addiction, Ziawudun said. She was “like someone who simply existed, ot-

herwise she was dead, completely finished by the rapes”.

“They say people are released, but in my opinion everyone who leaves the camps is finished.”

And that, she said, was the plan. The surveillance, the internment, the indoctrination, the dehumanisation, the sterilisation, the torture, the rape.

“Their goal is to destroy everyone,” she said. “And everybody knows it.”



Analysts say the policy against the Uyghurs flows directly from President Xi Jinping

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