

## “They forced me to abort”: in Kazakhstan, survivors of Chinese camps tell their stories

Léa Polverini

*Arbitrary arrests, interrogations, torture, forced labor... The Chinese repressive machine raging in the Xinjiang region affects Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities alike. Kazakh survivors who managed to cross the border bring back with them tales of this massive enterprise of dehumanization.*

<https://www.slate.fr/monde/kazakhstan-xinjiang-la-frontiere-des-larmes/ils-mont-forcee-avorter-rescapes-camps-reeducation-chine-ouighours-racontent-arrestations-tortures-avortements>

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Exhausted. Rahima is exhausted: every day, every night, as that throbbing headache never leaves her. There is also that pain in her knees, which makes her bend double, and that sagging spine, adding to her daily torment. Rahima is only 35, but the ten months she spent in Chinese “re-education camps” were enough to break her.

Without ever knowing where she was going or what awaited her, Rahima Senbai was gradually caught up in China's cold repressive machine.

For her, it all began in August 2017, with a seemingly innocuous call from the local police. On the line, an officer urged her to travel to her native province, Xinjiang, in order to register with the authorities. It's been three years since Rahima moved to neighboring Kazakhstan with her husband and four children, but her work as an interpreter for the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China regularly takes her across the border.

This summons is only the prelude to a long series of interrogations that will take her all the way to the Chinese jails, without her being informed of the crimes of which she is accused. When she remembers what happened to her, Rahima spins out one date after another, as if this litany were the last concrete thing she could hold on to, and which would attest to the reality of her ordeal. Despite her memory problems, these milestones have stayed with her, alike pieces of evidence that she holds on to, hoping that one day justice will be served against the Chinese regime, accused of perpetrating crimes against humanity.

But there are some things for which she will never be able to obtain reparation. On October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017, which was to be her last day of freedom, two police officers and a nurse came to collect her from her parents' home in Tekes. *“I was two months pregnant. They told me I had to have an abortion, as I already had four children, and a fifth was not allowed under Chinese law. At first, I refused, but they told me that if I didn't have an abortion, I would be convicted as a criminal and would go to prison for four years. They took me to the maternity ward and forced me to have an abortion. After that, I was sent to prison”*, she recounts.

### Shattering all hope

Survivors' attention is often fixed on details: the yellow line you have to walk on in the narrow corridors of the camps, the spacing of the bars of the cages in which you have to squat all day, the fluorescent pink color of the injections regularly administered, the sensation of cold that comes to cut your feet, the musty taste of the steamed buns that remains in your mouth long after you've spat them out...

Everybody tell the same story, of how bodies and minds are crushed – only the places and methods change. While some are thrown into solitary confinement, others must spend long hours on the tiger's chair, that torture instrument favored by the Chinese police; still others are forced to learn and recite *ad nauseam* patriotic songs of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), or to keep watch over their fellow inmates, perhaps hoping for a promotion that will take them to the other side of the cages and truncheons.

Life in the camps is governed by a set of strict rules that can change from one day to the next, depending on the directives received by those in charge of the “educational” (understand “prison-like”) complex, or the overzealousness of some guard. Sometimes arbitrary, sometimes linked to the holding of a major political event such as the annual CCP congress, these changes are designed to maintain constant psychological pressure on the prisoners, breaking any routine or element of familiarity.

In the camps, uncertainty reigns, and paradoxically, so does repetition: over and over again, the same interrogations, with the same questions, the same accusations, the same demands for confessions. *“Every week, they would come and interrogate us, sometimes in the middle of the night. They gave us papers on which we had to write in Chinese and confess to crimes we had never committed. They pressured everyone to confess, and many began to lose their understanding of what a question was, and to develop psychological problems”*, recalls Dina Nurdybay, 32, who spent eleven months between two re-education camps, a Communist Party school and a forced labor factory.

### **Presumed guilty**

These questions invariably concern the practice of Islam, and the prisoners' possible links with foreign countries. *“They have a standard questionnaire, and start by asking questions about our religious education: do you perform the *namaz* [Muslim prayer, ed. note], alone or with other people, at home or at the mosque, do your relatives perform it too, do the women wear the *hijab*... If you answer that you pray alone at home, they accuse you of being a religious extremist”*, explains Askar\*, who worked in the service of the CCP as a mosque guard in Xinjiang, before being arrested and sent to a re-education camp at the end of 2017.

In reality, the reason for those arrests is often found afterwards, because something has to be written on the detainees' files. Rahima, daughter of an imam, learned after a few weeks that she shouldn't have had WhatsApp on her phone, an application banned in China in favor of WeChat; Dina learned that her trade in traditional Kazakh clothing made her a separatist, as Kazakhstan is considered a terrorist country by China; Askar learned that he was a “*wild imam*”, i.e. an imam with no formal religious education, despite his degree in Islamic studies from a CCP university – he would later learn that he had been arrested on the false accusations of former colleagues lurking for promotion.

In fact, arrests are massive and arbitrary. In order to be blacklisted by the Party and sent to a re-education camp or prison, it is more or less sufficient not to belong to the Han ethnic majority, which the CCP sees as the spearhead of national unity. However, in Xinjiang, historically known as East Turkestan, which has seen two republics claim independence, there is a multiplicity of ethnic minorities, spread across several so-called autonomous provinces. Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Uzbeks, Dungans, Tatars, Mongols, etc. live in these territories and perpetuate their own traditions, which in the eyes of the CCP are evidence of separatism that must be nipped in the bud.

The first camps in Xinjiang, which appeared from 2014 onwards, went unnoticed at that time, and most of the region's inhabitants felt unconcerned by the repressive policies that seemed intended

to affect only proven criminals. *“I had heard rumors of arrests, but I wasn't afraid, because I was a Chinese citizen, and I thought I had nothing to fear. I was busy with my work, and I wasn't thinking about these policies of the Chinese government”*, recalls Ajar\*. Living from a trade between China and Kazakhstan, she soon enough found herself caught up in the new Chinese directives, which became much stricter from 2016 onwards.

*“At the entrance to the camp, there was an inscription in Chinese: ‘\*\*\* City Vocational Training Center’. But this re-education camp was not a training center. There were very high walls, and it was surrounded by barbed wire”*, she describes. She spent there nine months swallowing Xi Jinping's televised speeches and boiled water, doing military exercises outside at -4°F in weary slippers, and studying the Chinese language, before being transferred to another, even more secure camp, a few hundred meters away.

Recalling those long days of anguish and terror spent far from her children and without news of her family, Ajar cannot contain her tears: *“Day after day, I began to lose hope of being freed. Sometimes I thought of suicide. I saw a few people in the cells who tried to kill themselves, they were banging their heads against the walls.”*

### **Collaborating in silence**

Many survivors remember the screams and cries that echoed through the camps, despite the ban on breaking the silence. For Dina, the hardest part was seeing children being subjected to this kind of treatment.

In April 2018, having just been transferred to a Party school in Nilka county, she discovered a place where detainees were separated into three categories: elderly, young women, and children, placed in orphanages: *“Children were often beaten because they didn't speak Chinese. They would ask us for sweets or bread because they were hungry. Sometimes, some of them would come to me and ask where their mother was, if she was still alive... I couldn't see any joy in their eyes. They couldn't even cry like children, because if they did, they'd be punished. They were no longer children, they had become adults far too soon.”*

The elderly are not spared either, whatever their physical condition. So it was that 76-year-old Saule\* found herself locked up in a former Emin County hospital converted into a re-education camp, sharing a small cell of around ten square meters with fifteen other old women, all ill, and subjected to daily humiliations: *“The guards had no mercy on us. If we wanted to go to the toilet more than the three times a day we were allowed, they'd shout at us. One day, an old woman collapsed because of her high blood pressure, she remained paralyzed over half her body, wincing, but despite this, they left her in our cell.”*

So sometimes, solidarity is organized among the inmates. Ajar remembers the almost 70-year-old woman who was put on the tiger chair for a whole day because she spoke Uyghur. *“The first time, I protested in front of a guard, telling him that this woman could be his own mother, and that if she was old and couldn't speak Chinese, it wasn't his fault. He just closed the door and told me to shut up. As the day went by, I knocked on the door and shouted. When the camp commission came, they saw my behavior on camera, and took me to a dark, narrow room, where there was barely enough room to squat. I stayed there for three days, during which I refused to eat or drink.”*

But the promiscuity and constant pressure exerted on the prisoners also fostered a climate of mistrust and rivalry, with the guards encouraging mutual denunciations. *“They forced us to watch each other, and report on everyone's actions. It caused a lot of problems. If someone wanted to be released quickly, they'd start telling the camp leaders bad things about someone else. As for me, I was told that since I had studied Chinese, I understood China better than the others, and I could cooperate to be released sooner, Ajar points out with disgust. Above all, there were problems between the different ethnic groups: in the cells, Uyghurs and Kazakhs*

*looked at each other like enemies. They'd tell Uyghurs to keep an eye on Kazakhs, and Kazakhs to keep an eye on Dungans, and so on. If someone was punished, we suspected it came from a fellow inmate; there were fights because of that."*

### **Torture under control**

Nothing escapes surveillance. In each cell, cameras are ever more numerous, to demonstrate by their very presence the absence of any escape: four here, six there, for tiny cells where prisoners have to take turns sleeping in bunk beds for lack of space.

*"When we went to sleep, we had to lie straight on the bed, on our backs. It was forbidden to turn right or left. There were twenty-three of us in the cell, and at night two of us had to stay awake to watch the others in shifts. If someone moved, we had to call them to order, and if we didn't, we could be punished,"* recounts Ospan\*, who shared his first cell with twenty-four people.

This former shepherd in his fifties, who was arrested when he tried to sell his flock and move to Kazakhstan with his family, has suffered severe after-effects from his time in the camps, and finds it difficult to recall the events. What he remembers most about the camps is the dazzling light, permanently on, which prevented him from sleeping and burned his eyes.

*"I was always tired, always sleepy. I don't remember how I felt because we were given lots of injections and pills. They said it was against the flu, but we didn't really know what it was. My memory is very bad now. I was forced to sit on the tiger's chair many times, I don't remember how many, maybe two or three times a month",* he estimates wheezily.

The survivors' stories complement each other, showing the extent of the abuse inflicted, as well as the logic of dehumanization that reigned in the Chinese camps. *"When I returned to Kazakhstan, I heard other survivors talk about the torture they had suffered. Their stories seemed to indicate that people from Tekes, Gbulja and Bortala Mongol counties had been subjected to the harshest treatment, because many Uyghurs live in these areas,"* reports Rahima. Herself, originally from Tekes, but of Kazakh ethnicity, was subjected to repeated violence.

*"We've all been tortured, she says. Just after we arrived in prison, they sprayed us with cold water for five days. I just had an abortion and I was very weak, but they didn't believe me when I said I was sick. When they saw that I had a fever of 104°F, they gave me just one pill. After that, I was handcuffed and shackled, and had to lie on the floor like this. After seven days, my limbs started to shrink, and my legs bled, so they finally removed the restraints."*

Cold water was followed by electric shocks, repeated beatings and sexual violence. Rahima recounts how, three times a month, the guards would bring a pepper-based powder diluted in water, and force the women to wash their sex with it. *"They would stay with us and watch us do it. They'd tell us it was against germs or viruses, and force us to do it."* Many of the women now released from China's re-education camps and prisons can testify to gynecological problems and infertility. Rape, also perpetrated in the camps, often remains taboo.

### **All is well**

During the rare visits authorized to families, which often take place after several months of confinement, and can take place at a rate of five minutes per month – to which are sometimes added a few brief telephone calls – prisoners are required to present a smiling face to their loved ones.

*"When we receive visitors, the guards make us walk along the yellow line, black bag over our head, hands on our head, then they remove the bag and the handcuffs before entering the room, and order us not to say anything to our*

*loved ones about our poor living conditions. We have to say that everything's fine here, that we're taking lessons and getting a good education,"* says Ospan.

Constantly repeating untruths is part of the brainwashing process to which prisoners are subjected. While some had to follow a program of intensive courses to the glory of the CCP, such as Rahima, who had to start each day at 4am with military exercises and then go and study Chinese for eight hours a day, or Ajar, who had to fill in pages and pages of Chinese characters and various confessions every week, others saw the days go by in an endless wait.

*"In fact, they didn't teach us anything. We weren't taught anything, we just had to stand in line and sit up straight on plastic stools,* says Ospan. *During one of my last interrogations, they told me I wasn't in prison but in a vocational training center. They told me I wasn't a criminal, that they'd just taught me things, which is why I shouldn't be scared but rather happy."*

Ospan sketches a rare smile, and continues: *"At that point, I asked them for my school certificate, and the papers to certify that I wasn't a criminal. I told them that if I went back to Kazakhstan, I'd have to prove to the authorities that I was just a student. Obviously, they didn't give me anything."*

### **Prison outside the walls**

Leaving the camps does not mean regaining their freedom. Most survivors still have to spend several months, sometimes years, under house arrest in their home counties. Sometimes staying with their parents, sometimes in a building specially set up by the local authorities, they are obliged to continue the merry-go-round of the great Communist cure, and to take part in staged events filmed sometimes by the police, sometimes by government press agencies, to show how virtuous and joyful their lives are now, free of all anti-Chinese thought.

When she finally manages to leave the forced-labor factory where she had to sew the uniforms for her previous detention center, Dina can only feel uneasy, still steeped in the uncertainties to which she has become accustomed: *"When I was released, I didn't know if I was free or not, I didn't feel anything."* Directly conveyed to the local police station, she had to spend the night writing a report, singing the praises of the CCP.

*"They gathered all my relatives in the village, and told me I had to thank the Party, the government and the country for everything they had done for me. I thanked China for giving me a good education and for changing my mind, because I was on the wrong path. I said that I used to be a nationalist, on the path of terrorism, but that I no longer had these bad thoughts, and that I was now an obedient citizen. When I read the report, I couldn't stop crying, I cried and cried and read,"* she recalls.

Above all, she remembers the lack of reaction from her closest ones: *"No one said anything to me, or showed me how happy they were to see me, no one greeted me. They just listened to me, then went home. During those eleven months in the concentration camp, the people close to me were under a lot of pressure, being told again and again that I was a criminal, that I had done bad things. Maybe they believed it, maybe they were afraid of being in danger themselves. When they left without saying a word to me, I cried."*

A few months later, as she was called back by the authorities to become a sewing teacher in her former factory, and as she saw the trap closing in on her once again, Dina managed to escape from Xinjiang after obtaining a week's leave to visit her ailing father in Kazakhstan. As she left, she set fire to her workshop. *"I was so angry, I didn't want to leave anything to the Chinese government,"* she explains in a laugh. Since then, her bank account has been blocked, and the authorities have estimated her debt at 70,000 yuan (about 9,850 USD), which they have passed on to her uncle, still living in Xinjiang, and which she hopes to repay one day.

Among camp survivors, the terror instilled during detention is tenacious. While many fear for their loved ones back home, others still fear for their safety, even after crossing the border to seek refuge in Kazakhstan, which continues to maintain cordial relations with China.

While on August 31<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the UN finally pronounced itself on the subject, raising the possibility of crimes against humanity perpetrated by Xi Jinping's regime against Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, impunity persists; the victims of this vast enterprise of submission remain for the most part destitute, and condemned to the silence of fear. Although China began closing most of its re-education camps in 2020 in response to international pressure, it is estimated that almost 300,000 people remain locked up in Xinjiang's prisons to this day.

*\*For security reasons, some names have been changed, as most of the survivors still have relatives in Xinjiang.*