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China: Dozens still subject to enforced disappearance three years after crackdown on unrest in Urumqi

Families harassed and detained for looking for loved ones - Third Anniversary of 5 July 2009 protests

Three years after a harsh crackdown on protests by Uighurs in Urumqi, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), dozens, if not hundreds, of Uighurs remain subjected to enforced disappearance by the authorities, their families given no information on their whereabouts, well-being or legal status.

Authorities in Xinjiang have detained, threatened and intimidated families seeking information about missing relatives in a sustained attempt to stop them searching or petitioning higher authorities. This month dozens of Uighur families have finally publicized their quest for their loved ones, demanding answers or redress. Those who first revealed their stories in interviews with Radio Free Asia (RFA) have since described intensified surveillance, threats, and orders to stop speaking to overseas groups

Amnesty International calls on the Chinese authorities to reveal the whereabouts and legal status of these individuals subjected to enforced disappearance, and to end the persecution of family members seeking answers and redress.

On 5 July 2009 Uighurs in Urumqi, capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), gathered to protest perceived government inaction over killings of migrant Uighur workers in Shaoguan, Guangdong Province on 26 June. While the demonstration started peacefully, rioting erupted following police use of violence against protesters. According to official figures, 197 died in the course of the violence, mostly Han Chinese.

Eye witness accounts gathered by Amnesty International following the unrest cast doubt on the official version of events and pointed to unnecessary or excessive use of force by police against Uighur protesters, including beatings, use of tear gas and shooting directly into crowds. Mass arrests followed the unrest, with house to house searches resulting in the arbitrary arrest of hundreds if not thousands. Numerous reports subsequently detailed widespread enforced disappearances, and torture and ill-treatment of Uighurs in detention.

Dozens, if not hundreds still forcibly disappeared

Over the last month dozens of Uighur families have come out publicly with their stories of family members disappeared since July 2009, the youngest 16 years old at the time of his detention. They include families from Urumqi, Kashgar, and Qaraqash county (Hotan Prefecture) in the XUAR.

Among those missing are a butcher, a car mechanic, a restaurant manager, a bus driver, street fruit vendor, a chef, a 16 year old student, a recent university graduate about to start a new job, a chef/musician, and a recent graduate of a forest design school. Only 19 of these families have allowed their names to be made public. All are fearful of retaliation by the authorities..

It is likely that this group is a small fraction of the families with disappeared relatives. Patigul Eli, the Mother of Imammemet Eli, said that over the years she had met at least 30 other

families in front of police and government buildings in Urumqi also seeking information about relatives who disappeared after being detained during mass arrests following the July 2009 unrest. Wang Mingshan, the chief of the Urumqi Public Security Department, is reported to have acknowledged receiving 300 requests from families for help in locating such relatives.

According to one family member there are more than 200 families in one county in Hotan prefecture alone – Qaraqash county – with missing relatives. Many of these families have been afraid to come forward out of fear of retribution by the authorities. The financial burden of travelling to Urumqi and Beijing is considerable for many, but nevertheless they have made repeated trips in search of information. Some say that they are not even seeking redress or compensation from the authorities for the disappearance of their loved ones, they simply want to know if they are dead or alive. Some have described how living with the uncertainty has been in many ways harder than if they had been informed of tragic news at the outset.

International bodies including the UN Committee against Torture and the UN Human Rights Committee, have held in a number of cases that the authorities' denial of a family's right to know what has happened to their relatives for months and years violates the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment.

Below are selected accounts of disappeared individuals whose cases were first made public by RFA and which Amnesty International has been able to confirm through a variety of additional sources.

Turghun Obulqasim

Turghun Obulqasim, 33 years old at the time, was taken away by police on 9 July 2009 from his workplace, the Medina Restaurant in the Huaqiao Hotel in Urumqi, along with four other employees. On July 5, the day of the protests in Urumqi, Turghun was working at the restaurant. Salfurat, the restaurant and hotel manager, shut down the restaurant and locked the doors after the unrest broke out, to protect his employees. He also allowed them to stay at the hotel so they would not have to risk going out on the street as the riots and crackdown continued. According to Salfurat, neither Turghun nor the other four had been outside the hotel either on or after 5 July. According to him, more than 70 employees of the four restaurants located in the Huaqiao Hotel were taken away by police on 9 July.

Salfurat subsequently learned that Turghun had been taken to Lyudawan Police Station in Urumqi, and he arranged for some money to be sent to him. However, when he returned two days later to the police station he was told that Turghun was no longer being held there but was given no information about where he had been taken. After continued efforts to locate Turghun, Salfurat was interrogated by the police and warned to stop his involvement. He began providing Merhaba, Turghun's wife, financial support (600 Yuan a month) as she looked for her husband, as with Turghun missing Merhaba no longer had the means to provide for herself and their child.

Merhaba says she has been seeking her husband since the day he was taken away. She said, "I can't count the number of times I have gone to the city public security bureau asking about my husband. I go every week, sometimes on a Tuesday, sometimes other days. Every time they tell me "go home, take care of your children. We'll get back to you. Go home."

In three years the Chinese authorities have told her nothing about the whereabouts or well-being of her husband.

Asked if she has hired a lawyer she says "No". She said that last year the authorities told her they would find her a lawyer, but have not yet done so. Asked why it has taken so long, she replied "I don't know. I don't know anything." Asked if paying a lawyer would be difficult, she said "Of course. That's a problem and there are all types of other challenges for us... "

Merhaba recounts that she regularly sees up to five or six other families also looking for disappeared family members whenever she goes to the Urumqi City Public Security Bureau, the place she most regularly visits to find answers. "We speak for a bit, then we all go home."

Merhaba and Turghun have one small child.

Abaxun Sopur



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Abaxun Sopur, father of four children, was taken away by the police on 7 July in Urumqi. According to his wife, Reyhangul Tahir, Abaxun, a fruit seller, had made special efforts to stay away from the area where the riots took place in Urumqi on 5 July shifting to the Hualing district of Urumqi, far from the unrest, to sell his fruit. He returned home safely on the night of 5 July, and decided not to venture out on 6 July. However, on the 7 July he ventured out to continue his fruit selling. That evening he called Reyhangul telling her that he and his friends had been stopped by the police while returning home. Abaxun told his wife the police had offered him and his friends a ride home, as many of the streets were blocked.

Instead, the police took them to the Shenming Police Station near People's Square in Urumqi. Abaxun told his wife not to worry, that he would soon be home. However, at 11pm that night Abaxun was still not home and his phone was turned off. Reyhangul was subsequently unable to contact him or to get any further information regarding his whereabouts from the authorities.

A month after his detention, a group of Uighur men released from detention confirmed to Reyhangul that Abaxun had been taken to the Shenming Police station on the evening of 7 July and told her he had been interrogated by a Kazakh police officer named Aytan. Abaxun and around 30 other detained individuals were then transferred to various prisons and detention centres in Urumqi, but they did not know which one Abaxun was sent to.

Reyhangul recounts that she located the Kazakh police officer Aytan, who she says confirmed he had interrogated Abaxun after he arrived at the police station on 7 July and found no grounds on which to continue detaining him. However, his superior had forbidden him from releasing Abaxun. According to Aytan, Abaxun was sent to the Diyentey Detention Centre in Urumqi.

However, when Reyhangul went to the Diyentey Detention Centre the officers told her Abaxun had never been registered there. She recounts how she then went to all the detention centres in and around Urumqi and inquired with police and government authorities at all levels seeking news of her husband, with no success.

Reyhangul describes her relentless search for her husband over the last three years. She joined seven other families whose relatives have disappeared and travelled to Beijing to petition the central authorities. However, shortly after their arrival in Beijing they were forced to return to Urumqi by more than 40 police officers who had been sent from the XUAR to bring them back.

Reyhangul says that after she travelled to Beijing the authorities forced her and her four children to move out of Urumqi to Kashgar in order to prevent her from further petitioning.

Asked recently if she had had any news about her husband Reyhangul answered "What news...No news at all! No news so far. I don't know whether the authorities ate him up alive or what. Up to now the government hasn't told us anything about where he is".

"We haven't heard any news about him during the last 3 years. It's about 10 days now since the local police came to my house. I told him that I am going to Beijing again to appeal my husband's disappearance. Last time I went to Beijing, my first time, the police arrested us and kept us at the detention centre and then brought us back home. Because of that I couldn't make my complaint. Since then I haven't heard any news about my husband. After the police

heard I was planning to go to Beijing again to complain, they came to my house, and the village and police heads also came to my house, to pressure me not to go. But they didn't say anything about my husband. No news at all!"

Like the other families who have spoken out, Reyhangul was recently visited by police and warned not to speak to anyone again about her husband.

Imammemet Eli



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Imammemet Eli, a graduate of the South China University of Technology and 25 years old at the time, was detained in Urumqi on 14 July, 2009 along with four friends while playing billiards. While his other friends were gradually released, there was no news of Imammemet. According to his Mother Imammemet initially participated in the 5 July protests but left when things turned violent.

Patigul Eli, his Mother, has been seeking answers from the authorities about him for the last three years.

"For almost three years, I don't know where my son is – even whether he is alive or dead," Patigul told RFA.

When Patigul first inquired with the Liudawan police department where Imammemet was first taken into custody, an officer gave her a piece of paper saying he was being detained in the Midongchu Detention Center in

Michuen county. But on 10 separate visits to that Detention Center she was told they had no record of him.

Nine months after his detention Patigul received news from former inmates who had shared a cell with Imammemet. One of them told Patigul that Imammemet had been interrogated many times and tortured. He said that Imammemet was unwilling to eat and sometimes vomited. After one round of interrogation Imammemet was unable to stand when he returned to his cell.. According to another former cell-mate Imammemet was normal when he was brought back to the cell after the first and second interrogations, but the third time, he was away from the cell for three days and when he returned he was unable to stand. Sometime in mid-August 2009 Imammemet was taken to hospital and never returned to the Detention Centre.

Since that time Patigul has had no further news about her son and her enquiries have fallen on deaf ears.

"The authorities in this region do not want to listen to me because the case is too difficult. The reporters in this region are too scared to hear my story because the case is too sensitive."

Patigul has said that after speaking to foreign media that she has been kept under constant surveillance and followed everywhere. She says there is a permanent police presence in front of her home that monitors her in 4-hr shifts. Once, she was kept in detention for 8 days for having insulted a policeman who would not respond to her enquiries.

"They go with me when I do my shopping and they wait for me outside when I visit someone's home."

For Patigul, a widow with four children, not knowing the fate of her son has meant she cannot even go through a process of mourning or deal with her grief.

Patigul Eli "I would not have suffered so much if I knew my son was dead, because I would have been able to forget him or at least find some way to accept this fate."

Nebijan Eli



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Nebijan Eli, 16 years old at the time of his detention in 2009, is the youngest of the disappeared whose families recently came forward. His Father, Elijan Eli recounted how he last saw Nebijan, along with several other detained individuals, being forced to march down a street in Urumqi, surrounded by about 30 policemen.

Elijan Eli recounted seeing his son beaten and kicked into a police van that then took him away. He tried to follow the van by motorcycle but he told RFA “When I witnessed that scene and I was helpless, I just asked myself for the first time why was I born into this world”.

When Elijan inquired with the police, he was told his son was not on the list of detainees.

After three years of inquiries, Elijan Eli has been given no information regarding the whereabouts or well-being of his son.

Public Document

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