

People's Republic of China

Rebiya Kadeer's personal account of Gulja after the massacre on 5 February 1997

I began hearing about terrible events occurring in Gulja in early February 1997, and decided – as a Uighur and a member of the Chinese National People's Congress, that I had to go to see for myself what was happening.

I arrived in Gulja City in the morning of 7 or 8 February, and went to the home of a Uighur friend of mine. In the afternoon my friend took me to the home of another Uighur family whose two sons had been killed during the Chinese military crackdown on the peaceful protestors in Gulja a couple of days earlier. Their daughter had been arrested and her whereabouts were unknown. The parents were pale and highly distraught. Just as I was trying to talk with them, the Ili Prefectural Police and Chinese Military officers and soldiers burst into the house. The soldiers pulled the parents by the hair and kicked them really hard. The top military officer ordered me to put my hands on my head and to face the wall and said, "if you resist or shout and scream, we will shoot you." It was clear that it was the Chinese military officer in command, not the prefectural police, who didn't dare say anything in front of him. They forced me to strip completely naked and searched all my clothes.

After finding nothing I was ordered to put my clothes back on, and was taken to the prefectural police station for further questioning. The police chief warned me not to visit any more homes and to leave the city immediately. He said I would be held responsible for the deaths of any people I visited who passed information on to me, and even my own death if something terrible happened. I was then allowed to leave the police station. I nevertheless resolved to stay in the city to gather more information.

As I left the police station someone dropped a note in front of me which read "Go and visit the Yengi Hayat Neighbourhood." When I arrived in that neighbourhood I saw a large house with all the doors open, and even some food on the table, but with no one at home. I knocked at the house next door, but no one answered. I tried another house, and a Hui Muslim opened the door and addressed me in perfect Uighur. I asked him what had happened to the people in the house next door. He said they may have been killed in the demonstration. He said they had been really nice neighbours. When I asked him how many people had lived in the house he was not comfortable answering, but he said many had been killed in that neighbourhood and taken away in military trucks.

I asked him if he could direct me to the home of a Uighur family in the neighbourhood, but he said most Uighurs would be too scared to let me into their homes. But he pointed me to the house of an Uzbek family. A 60-year old Uzbek woman opened the door. Despite her concern that I was being followed she gave me some tea and spoke to me about the demonstration and the crackdown. She said she had seen numerous Chinese military trucks piled high with dead or beaten Uighurs going into the local Yengi Hayat Prison but had not seen people leaving. She said she was certain that nearly 1000 Uighurs had been taken into the prison, but that the prison could only accommodate 500 prisoners. Furthermore, she said she saw many

military trucks leaving the prison that were filled with dirt. Many others I spoke with had also witnessed this. Many suspected that dead bodies were buried in the dirt and were being taken out to be disposed of.

Later, I visited the home of another individual, Abdushukur Hajim, who had not participated in the demonstration but who had witnessed killings by the Chinese military. While at his home, the Ili Prefectural Police broke in and detained me for a second time, again taking me back to the police station. I learned later that this gentleman was subsequently arrested and sentenced to two years in prison for passing “state secrets” to me. When he was released two years later he had had a mental breakdown.

Even after my second detention and warning by the Ili Prefectural Police I did not leave Ghulja. I simply felt it was my responsibility to bear witness to the events there and to gather information. I was eventually detained a third time. When I arrived at the police station they said “we’ve told you repeatedly to leave but you are still here. OK, then, if you are so interested to know what happened here then look at this.”

They then showed me footage they had filmed of the military crack-down in Gulja in the proceeding days. I believe their intention was to terrify me and to intimidate me into silence. I watched the footage in the police station with several other people, including the prefectural police chief. I have never seen such viciousness in my life and it is difficult for me to adequately describe the horror of the scenes in the film. In one part dozens of military dogs were attacking – lunging and biting at, peaceful demonstrators, including women and children. Chinese PLA soldiers were bludgeoning the demonstrators – thrashing at their legs until they buckled and fell to the ground. Those on the ground – some alive, others dead, were then dragged across the ground and dumped all together into dozens of army trucks.

The footage also captured a young Uighur girl screaming, “Semetjan”, then running to a young man who was bleeding and being dragged by a Chinese soldier to a truck. Another soldier knocked her down and shot her dead right on the spot. He then dragged her by the hair and dumped her into the same truck into which the young man had been thrown. In another part of the film gunshots were fired into a group of Uighur children, aged 5 to 6, who were with a woman holding a baby, all were shot. It wasn’t clear where the guns were being fired from, whether from a rooftop or truck-top. There were tanks in the street, and in the film one could see three kinds of PLA soldiers: those with a helmet, baton, and shield; those with automatic weapons; and those with rifles with bayonets. In the film I heard Chinese soldiers shouting, “kill them!, kill them!” I heard one officer shouting to a soldier, “Is he a Uighur or Chinese? Don’t touch the Chinese but kill the Uighur.”

After watching the footage I felt I had done what I could. I had seen enough of the horror. I left Gulja City for Urumchi. Upon arriving at the Gulja airport I was strip-searched by agents of the Chinese National Security Bureau. They confiscated all of my belongings, including my clothing and luggage. They gave me new clothing to wear and escorted me to the airplane.

Approximately ten days after my return to Urumchi, one woman and two young men from Gulja came to my office. They told me that they hadn’t participated in the demonstration

in Gulja but since the Chinese authorities indiscriminately arresting many Uighurs, including those who hadn't participated in the demonstration, they decided to flee to Urumchi. One of them said his father was even a communist party member, but he still didn't feel safe. The woman told me with tears in her eyes that Chinese soldiers fired into a crowd of Uighurs waving goodbye to their relatives who were being paraded through the city streets in trucks on their way to the execution ground. She said when one desperate mother shouted to her son on the truck and raised her hands, Chinese soldiers on a building fired upon her with a machine gun and killed 5-6 Uighurs standing beside her. Some Russians standing nearby saw what happened and shouted "Fascists! Fascists!"

During my stay in Ghulja I visited some 30 Uighur families and met with nearly 100 people. I felt the pain of the Uighur families who lost their sons and daughters in the military crackdown on this peaceful protest. Having been detained and threatened on three occasions, I was able to understand the severity of the situation by experiencing first hand mistreatment at the hands of Chinese military and police.

I am speaking out so that we do not forget those who lost their lives in Gulja and to call for accountability on the part of the Chinese authorities.

Background

On 5 February 1997, dozens of people were killed or seriously injured when the Chinese security forces brutally broke up a peaceful demonstration in the city of Gulja (Yining) in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of China. Hundreds, possibly thousands, lost their lives or were seriously injured in the unrest that occurred the following day. Large numbers of people were arrested during the demonstrations and their aftermath. Many detainees were beaten or otherwise tortured. An unknown number remain unaccounted for.

Uighurs are a mainly Muslim ethnic minority who are concentrated primarily in China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Since the 1980s, the Uighurs have been the target of systematic and extensive human rights violations. This includes arbitrary detention and imprisonment, incommunicado detention, and serious restrictions on religious freedom as well as cultural and social rights. Uighur political prisoners have been executed after unfair trials. In recent years, China has exploited the international "war on terror" to suppress the Uighurs, labelling them "terrorists", "separatists", or "religious extremists".

Rebiya Kadeer, nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006, is a Uighur human rights activist and former prisoner of conscience. In November 2006, she was also elected president of the World Uighur Congress (WUC) in Munich. She lives in exile in the US.