

[China | Uyghur camp survivor reminds UN of duty to urgently start remote reporting](#)

07.06.2021

In an online discussion organised by the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) and the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), Uyghur camp survivor Gülbahar Jalilova shared her story of long-term arbitrary detention. Her testimony echoes mounting evidence of human rights violations that call for systematic UN monitoring and public reporting.



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A wide range of credible UN and civil society evidence point to [crimes against humanity](#) being committed by the Chinese authorities against Uyghurs and Turkic people. This includes arbitrarily detaining over a million individuals, including nationals of neighbouring countries, in internment camps across what is known as the 'Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region' (XUAR). Gülbahar Jalilova was among them.

Jalilova was detained in 2017 for sixteen months on spurious counter-terrorism grounds. She was held under harsh conditions in Ürümqi, the capital of the Uyghur region, where she faced repeated gender-based violence and torture.

In February 2021, ten UN human rights experts [sent a joint letter](#) to the Chinese government on her case, expressing 'deep concern' about her reported arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, poor detention conditions and gender-based violence. The independent experts requested detailed information and explanations from the Government, stressing that 'such violence, combined with strategies to prevent inmates from cherishing and expressing their cultural identity, including their language and religious beliefs or practices, lead to indoctrination and forced assimilation of people'.

In the face of high risks, she decided to speak out on the cruel reality faced by Uyghur women in internment camps in an online event held on 25 May by ISHR and the WUC.

Zumretay Arkin, the WUC's Program and Advocacy Manager who spoke at the event, emphasised: 'The objective of these camps is to eliminate any "extremist thoughts" that are not in line with the government's agenda.'

Watch the full online discussion in [English](#) below, or watch it in [French](#), [Uyghur](#) or [Spanish](#).

'No one could hear our screams'

A Uyghur businesswoman of Kazakh nationality, Gülbahar Jalilova recalled that before her detention, she had an ordinary life. Yet, on 22 May 2017, she was arrested during a business trip to China for allegedly being a 'potential terrorist.' From this date, she was deprived of her liberty arbitrarily for sixteen months.

Her testimony provides harrowing insights into the deeply gendered impact of detention and ill-treatment on women. She describes a 'terrifying place', where 'conditions were ones of horror' – with a lack of adequate hygiene, food or water – and where women suffered from rape and 'constant degrading treatments', including for speaking in Uyghur among themselves.

'On arrival, I was stripped naked and was asked to change to a yellow uniform. I was forced to get a urine test to check if I was pregnant: if so, I would be taken to the hospital for forced abortion.'

Her testimony echoes that of many other Uyghur women who have reported sexual and gender-based violence

and forced sterilisation, pointing to the intersecting forms of violence and discrimination they face during detention, due to their gender and ethnicity. In introductory remarks at the event, **Elizabeth Broderick**, Chair-Rapporteur of the UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls, evoked the Working Group's [2019 report on women deprived of liberty](#). This report stressed that 'deprivation of liberty has devastating consequences for women's lives, put[ting] them at risk of torture, of violence and abuse, unsafe and unsanitary conditions, lack of access to health services, and often further marginalisation.'

'I saw girls as young as fourteen years old, and women as old as eighty. It hurt me deeply to see these young innocent teenagers experiencing such horror,' Jalilova recalled. 'It is extremely distressing.'

A collective duty to support Uyghur victims and hold China accountable

This is the first letter sent to the Chinese authorities on the case of an individual Uyghur camp survivor; however, it is not the first time that UN independent experts raise serious concerns about the situation in the Uyghur region. In June 2020, **50 UN experts** [jointly called for decisive measures](#) to address a range of grave violations including the 'collective repression of the population, especially religious and ethnic minorities, in Xinjiang and Tibet'. More recently, on 29 March 2021, a group of eight experts [raised serious concerns](#) about 'exploitative working and abusive living conditions that may constitute arbitrary detention, human trafficking, forced labour and enslavement.'

'While the Chinese government deploys great effort into smearing victims and denying accusations, these letters show the international community that what is happening in the Uyghur region is dire, and in violation of the most basic rights protected under international law,' said Raphael Viana David, ISHR's Asia Programme Officer.

In November 2020, the UN **Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination** (CERD) wrote to the Government looking at the implementation of urgent recommendations from China's 2018 review, a turning point in bringing global attention to the arbitrary detention of over a million Uyghurs and Turkic people in camps. [In the letter](#), the Committee expressed grave concern that:

- NGOs working on human rights issues in China operate under extremely restricted circumstances that 'prevent [them] from documenting and investigating violations'
- 'Large numbers of Uyghurs and members of other minorities are arbitrarily detained in extrajudicial detention facilities operating as education and training centres and in forced labour camps'
- 'Children of those detained have been placed in State-run institutions, even of parents that have not given consent'
- Governmental controls over day-to-day life in Xinjiang, including 'stops by law enforcement at numerous check points' and 'facial recognition systems to identify and track Uyghurs', amount to 'violations of international legal prohibitions against discrimination'

'It is important that the UN continues to push for accountability; but the Chinese government is unwilling to provide the UN unfettered access', said Arkin. For her, 'the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet needs to exercise her independent mandate and find alternative routes, such as remote monitoring and public reporting: there is enough evidence outside the country, such as from brave camp survivors like Gülbahar.'

Asked about what to expect from the United Nations, Jalilova was clear: 'We want the UN to hold China accountable. We want officials to be tried.'

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Photo: Gülbahar Jalilova