

Former Chinese prisoner bears witness to camp horrors

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WASHINGTON (BP)—A Christian imprisoned for 10 months in western China is now in the United States, and he is bearing witness to the notorious “re-education” camps being operated by the Communist regime of the world’s most populous country.

Ovalbek Turdakun, his wife and son arrived in the United States April 8 after a lengthy but successful effort to avoid deportation back to China that was aided by allies in the United States and other countries.

Ovalbek is the first Christian to speak out about his detention in the camps in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, according to Axios, a news website that first reported on his arrival April 12.

The Chinese Communist Party primarily has targeted the Uyghurs, a primarily Muslim group in Xinjiang, in a genocidal campaign, but other ethnic groups also have been included in its suppression. Its tactics have included widespread detention in “re-education” camps, forced labor and a coercive population control program of abortion and sterilization.

The State Department under both the Trump and Biden administrations has determined China is guilty of genocide in Xinjiang.

Messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention’s 2021 meeting resoundingly adopted a resolution that condemned the Chinese Communist Party’s oppression of the Uyghurs and called for the U.S. government to take “concrete actions” to end the genocide. The SBC reportedly became the first Christian faith group to denounce China’s campaign against the Uyghurs as genocide.

Ovalbek endured torture during detention

In a Washington, D.C., news conference April 13, Ovalbek described a 10-month detention by the Chinese government that included torture and forced injections. He was under house arrest for another eight months after his release from the camp in December 2018.

An ethnic Kyrgyz, Ovalbek and his family walked across the border into Kyrgyzstan in December 2019 and eventually received aid in reaching the United States.

“I thank God that he brought me and my family safely here,” Turdakun said at the news conference through an interpreter. “I thank the American government.”

He also thanked two members of the audience who were instrumental in his family’s arrival in this country.

Chelsea Sobolik, director of public policy for the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, said: “The Chinese Communist Party has continued to wage a heinous, systematic war against Christians, Uyghurs, and other ethnic and religious minorities. Mr. Ovalbek, the first Christian detained who has been able to flee Xinjiang and come forward publicly about his experience, courageously shines a light on the genocide being committed by the CCP.

“Christians across the globe must continue to speak up in the face of this atrocity, and the ERLC will continue advocating for the religious freedom of all people in China.”

Hold China accountable

Speakers at the news conference said they expect Ovalbek's testimony will be invaluable in American and international efforts to hold the Chinese Communist Party accountable.

Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., told Ovalbek at the news conference, "We are inspired ... by your courage, by your faith, by your commitment to human rights, and by your very powerful and very keen powers of observation.

"Your information, your leadership is critical," Smith told him. While the focus is now on Russia's assault on Ukraine, "we can't take our focus off what is happening every single day in the concentration camps in Xinjiang."

Rodney Dixon, a British lawyer specializing in international law, told the news conference audience Ovalbek "is going to be vital in providing more first-hand, inside information on what is happening in China and in neighboring countries."

Dixon's legal team has urged the International Criminal Court to investigate Tajikistan, which borders Xinjiang, about the disappearance of Uyghurs, apparently back to China. A report will be submitted soon requesting an investigation and prosecution of China, he said.

Chinese officials took Ovalbek from his home in Xinjiang in February 2018 because they said he had stayed longer on a previous trip to Kyrgyzstan than was allowed, Axios reported. Ovalbek and other inmates were tortured in "tiger chairs," devices in which prisoners are frequently held in painful positions for hours or days. They were shocked with electric prods when they sought to change their positions, he said, Axios reported.

Other prisoners and he were forced to take pills and herbal teas, as well as "different kinds of injections," Ovalbek said. The prisoners experienced

hearing loss and fluids leaking from their ears after injections, he told Axios. He was unable to walk for months and had to be carried by other prisoners, Ovalbek said, according to Axios.

The Chinese Communist Party's oppressive practices in Xinjiang include tracking Uyghurs by means of a high-tech surveillance system that has obtained genetic data on many residents, according to reports.

It is estimated more than 1 million of the 12 million Uyghurs, and maybe as many as 3 million, have been detained in "re-education" camps. Forced labor by prisoners is common. Life in the camps reportedly can result in indoctrination, as well as rape, torture and coercive organ harvesting. Uyghur women are also at the mercy of forced abortions and sterilizations.

In December, President Biden signed into law the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, a bill supported by multiple religious freedom and human rights organizations. The law prohibits products made with forced labor in Xinjiang from being introduced into the American market.