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AP Exclusive: Uighurs flee China after riots

By GILLIAN WONG, Associated Press Writer Gillian Wong, Associated Press Writer – Mon Jun 21, 12:00 am ET

BEIJING – Police came looking for Vali days after bloody ethnic riots broke out in the far west last year, saying they had video footage of him among fleeing protesters and later shouting at an officer.

The 22-year-old man was not home, and his father called to tell him to stay away. Vali hid for weeks before escaping to the Netherlands to join an estimated 150 other Uighurs — a Muslim minority group from China's Xinjiang region — seeking refugee status.

"Once I got off the plane, I told the police that I need political asylum," Vali said in a phone interview. "I told them everything that I had been through and said I can no longer live in China. If I have to go back I am a hundred percent sure that I will be dead."

Nearly a year after the worst riots in China's far west in more than a decade, his story and that of another asylum seeker interviewed by The Associated Press are among the few accounts to emerge of how some Uighurs (pronounced WEE-gurs) got out amid a government crackdown.

At least 300 Uighurs are thought to have fled China since the July unrest, according to the World Uyghur Congress. Some slipped illegally into neighboring countries in Central Asia, which regularly extradite Uighurs back to China. Others with more money, such as Vali, paid thousands of dollars to criminal gangs and smugglers for plane tickets and visas.

China says some Uighurs are terrorists or criminals who pose a threat to the region's safety, and has previously insisted that Uighur refugees be extradited back. Foreign governments weary of immigrants and wary of offending China are often unwelcoming or play down the presence of Uighurs.

Cambodia sent back 20 Uighur refugees to China in December despite international protests. Turkey, which has strong ethnic and linguistic ties to the group, has eased entry requirements, but its government is reluctant to talk about the influx of dozens of Uighurs.

The Netherlands is home to what is believed to be largest group in Europe, because many international flights pass through Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport.

The two Uighurs in Holland told the AP of the fear of being ensnared by a crackdown that has detained hundreds, often unaccounted for months later. Chinese media reports say at least 25 people, mostly Uighurs, have been tried and sentenced to death for crimes related to the riots.

The Uighurs told their stories on condition that only their last names be used, citing fears of retaliation against their families. Now they wait to see if they will be granted asylum — or sent home.

On July 5, Vali was driving home when he stopped to let around 2,000 Uighur protesters pass as they marched southward in the city of Urumqi.

Armed police officers swarming in front of him suddenly opened fire in the direction of the protesters, sending them fleeing, he says. He panicked and drove through the crowd to get out. In the midst of the commotion, he says, his car was videotaped by state security.

Vali sped to his aunt's house, where he spent the night huddled with her family on the living room floor, listening to the sounds of gunfire and explosions. "I was terrified," he said. "None of us slept at all that night."

As long-simmering tensions between the Uighurs and the Han Chinese majority exploded into violence, Uighurs smashed windows, torched cars and attacked Han. Uighurs say security forces fired at them.

The streets were eerily quiet the next morning as Vali went home. Armed police had set up checkpoints at every intersection, stopping him each time to ask where he was headed. He passed razed shops, burnt cars and cleaners hosing away pools of blood from the streets.

The government says the unrest killed nearly 200 people, mostly Han, by official count. Many Uighurs disputed the figures, saying they saw or heard that security forces fired on Uighurs during the protest.

Two days later, Han vigilantes stormed into Uighur neighborhoods to take revenge. Vali said he saw a group of Han Chinese paramilitary police beating about a dozen unarmed Uighurs just outside his house. When the Uighur men fell to the ground, Han protesters ran over and stomped on their bodies and faces, he said.

"I want to take them to the hospital," Vali said he told police, who were blocking him from leaving his home.

"We will shoot you if you leave," the police replied.

"Then shoot me," Vali shouted, increasingly agitated. "Because I cannot just let these people lie there on the street to die."

The confrontation was caught on videotape, he says. Not long after, police turned up at his home looking for him.

Vali's father paid for his escape through the sale of their home. With 100,000 yuan (\$14,700) in hand, Vali took a train from Urumqi to the southern city of Guangzhou. There he stayed for another two months while waiting for travel documents he had paid a Chinese gang 90,000 yuan (\$13,200) to obtain on his behalf.

It was November by the time his escape route — a flight to Dubai, transiting in Amsterdam — was ready. A Chinese man dropped him off at the Guangzhou border control, but police detained and interrogated him for four hours before finally letting him go. He caught a bus to Hong Kong's airport and made the flight.

"It was only after I arrived in Holland that I finally felt safe," he said. "I thought the government would protect me."

But Vali soon found the Dutch government was less sympathetic than he had hoped. The Dutch immigration service rejected his application, saying his account of problems with Chinese authorities following the unrest was not credible, and pointed to his ability to travel legally out of the country.

"If the police believe I didn't take part in the protest, why would they come and look for me?" said Vali, who has filed an appeal. "Just for trying to seek political asylum, I will be in big trouble. It's a big crime."

Vali said he had also previously been in trouble with Chinese authorities over religious issues — he was expelled from high school in 2004 after a teacher spotted him praying at a mosque, violating a prohibition on students taking part in religious activities. In 2007, he was detained for three days by state security for helping 7,000 Muslim Uighurs in Pakistan travel to Saudi Arabia for the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.

Patiguli, 29, hid at home during the riots, fearing for her boyfriend, who had called to say he was joining the demonstrations, as well as her grandmother, who was outside.

When police found her boyfriend at her home a few days after the unrest, they also detained Patiguli and her brother, holding them in separate locations and interrogating them for six days. Her mother, a businesswoman, had to bribe officials to secure the release of the siblings.

Patiguli never saw or heard from her boyfriend again.

Patiguli and her brother went into hiding for eight months while her mother paid traffickers to help Patiguli escape. Patiguli flew out of Shanghai on a flight that transited in a European destination she did not disclose, where she was picked up by a Chinese man and driven to a hotel to stay a night before driving again.

"This is Amsterdam. There is a police office on the second floor of this building. Go in there," the man told her when they arrived at their final stop. He also wanted her passport and plane ticket, saying the Dutch would send her back to China if she still had them. "This would not be good for you, and it won't be good for us."

Patiguli walked into the building and applied for asylum. She later called Zainiding Tuersun, head of the Netherlands Uighur Association.

Zainiding says he knows of 150 Uighurs who have fled to Holland since the riot, and is closely tracking 70 cases. Of those, about 20 are likely to be given asylum, while another 30 or so have been rejected due to insufficient evidence of persecution, Zainiding said.

"The Dutch government does not understand the Uighur situation. It's so difficult to get things sent out of China right now, doing that will put their families back home in serious danger," said Zainiding. "The authorities here treat the Uighurs very coldly."

The Dutch government says immigration authorities are treating the Uighurs like all other cases.

"Amongst others, the immigration service checks whether people have to fear their human rights will be violated when they go back to their home country," Justice Ministry spokeswoman Karen Temmink said.

China says its citizens' legal rights are fully protected. "The Chinese government resolutely opposes any country accepting illegal immigrants, for any reason," Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang said Friday in a written response to a request for comment.

But Amnesty International says that in the past, the group has documented cases of returned Uighur asylum seekers in which some have been detained, reportedly tortured and in some cases sentenced to death and executed.

In January, Dutch officials came close to deporting a 20-year-old Uighur woman, forcibly putting her on a plane, before Zainiding and the Dutch Refugee Council managed to get the distraught woman off the flight and a reprieve on her case.

Many Uighur asylum seekers in the Netherlands have found it difficult convincing the Dutch government that they need asylum, said Laurence Verkooyen, Asian specialist at the Dutch Refugee Council.

"A lot of Uighurs say they were in the demonstrations in Urumqi, then the Dutch government says you don't have any proof that you were in the demonstration," Verkooyen said. "Or, they say you don't have any proof that the Chinese government knows that you participated in the demonstrations."

Patiguli says immigration authorities want evidence that she had been detained, or that her brother or boyfriend remained arrested, but contacting her family and asking for sensitive information would put them at risk of retaliation by Chinese authorities.

Patiguli's mother, who gave her name as Ainihasan, told the AP her son had been missing for two months and she believed police had taken him away.

"I cannot contact him," the 54-year-old woman said by phone from Urumqi, in tears. "I fear I have only one child left now. I beg the Dutch government to please help her. Please keep my daughter safe."

Associated Press writers Arthur Max, Toby Sterling and Bruce Mutsvairo in Amsterdam and Suzan Fraser in Ankara, Turkey, contributed to this report.

The Guardian, UK

Tibetan environmentalist says Chinese jailers tortured him

* Jonathan Watts, Asia environment correspondent

* guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 22 June 2010 18.17 BST

Award-winning conservationist and philanthropist Karma Samdrup tells court of beatings during interrogation

A jailed Tibetan environmentalist used the opening of his trial today to accuse Chinese captors of beatings, sleep deprivation and other maltreatment, his wife told reporters.

Karma Samdrup – a prominent businessman and award-winning conservationist – issued a statement in court detailing the brutal interrogation methods, including drugs that made his ears bleed, used on him since his detention on 3 January.

"If not for his voice, I would not have recognised him," his wife Zhenga Cuomao told the Associated Press.

She said Samdrup appeared gaunt when he appeared at the Yangqi county courthouse in Xinjiang, the mountainous province neighbouring Tibet.

Prosecutor Kuang Ying denied violence had been used against Samdrup, who founded the Three Rivers Environmental Protection group and pushed for conservation of the source region for the Yangtze, Yellow and Lancang (Mekong) rivers.

The wealthy Tibetan art collector is an unlikely political prisoner. His group has won several awards for its work, including the Earth Prize, which is jointly administered by Friends of the Earth Hong Kong and the Ford motor company.

In 2006, he was named philanthropist of the year by state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) for "creating harmony between men and nature".

He was arrested earlier this year and accused of robbing graves and stealing cultural artefacts. Supporters say these were old, trumped-up charges that were dismissed by police 12 years ago. If convicted, the maximum penalty is death or life in prison, though his lawyer says a more lenient sentence is likely.

His trial has been delayed for several weeks amid claims that he is being unfairly punished for lobbying the authorities for the release of his two brothers.

His siblings, Rinchen Samdrup and Jigme Namgyal, were arrested last August after their separate environmental protection group – Voluntary Environmental Protection Association of Kham Anchung Senggenamzong – sought to expose officials who hunted endangered animals. Namgyal is serving a 21-month re-education-through-labour sentence for "harming national security."

He is accused of illegally collecting information about the environment, natural resources and religion, organising petitions, and providing propaganda material for supporters of the Dalai Lama. Rinchen Samdrup is in custody but has not been tried.

According to the International Campaign for Tibet, this may be part of a new campaign against intellectuals.

The Washington-based group said last month that 31 Tibetans are now in prison "after reporting or expressing views, writing poetry or prose, or simply sharing information about Chinese government policies and their impact in Tibet today".

Accusations of police and prison guard brutality are commonplace in China. This month, Wu Lihong – an award-winning anti-pollution campaigner in Jiangsu province – told the Guardian he was beaten by guards during the three year jail sentence he has just completed.

"A state security official name Xie Lixin lashed me with a willow branch and burned me with a cigarette end. A guy name Wang Kewei bump my head against a wall, and another man surnamed Shen beat me to make me confess," he said. Wu – who is from the ethnic Han majority in China – was declared an Environmental Warrior by the National People's Congress in 2005 for tackling contamination in Lake Tai. He was later jailed on charges of blackmail.

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