HE FLED TO ESCAPE BRUTAL REPRESSION — ONLY TO DISCOVER, AS SO MANY UYGHUR REFUGEES HAVE, THAT CHINA'S POWER STRETCHES FAR BEYOND ITS BORDERS.

THE LONG ROAD FROM XINJIANG

BY NYROLA ELIMÄ AND BEN MAUK

PHOTOGRAPH BY SABIHA ÇIMEN

WHEN HASAN IMAM WAS A CHILD,

living on his parents' farm, he would sometimes hide inside a haystack. The farm was scattered across a few acres of a small village. Behind the family house was a cowshed and, next to it, a hay barn. Inside the barn, each haystack was identical to its neighbor, and in the stack farthest from the door his father had arranged some bedding. It was invisible unless you went looking for it.

The village was in Kargilik, a rural county in Xinjiang, China, between the Kunlun Mountains and the Taklamakan desert, across the border from India and Pakistan. The family grew whatever the government told them to from year to year, mostly wheat and corn. There were many rules to follow. When Communist Party cadres from the village visited the house, Imam knew to take his younger brother and run to their hiding place. He tried to lie still and breathe slowly. The smallest movement would send spiders scurrying out from the depths of hay. Sometimes the cadres left quickly, and Imam could return to the house before the TV show he was watching ended. But sometimes the visits lasted hours, and the boys would fall asleep. When that happened, their father would carry them both to bed.

Visits from cadres were a frequent occurrence in southern Xinjiang. One objective of the visits was to discover unregistered Uyghur children. Although the region was exempt from China's one-child policy, in 1988 the government issued a new directive limiting urban Uyghur families to two children and rural families to three. Parents who violated the policy were fined and could be subject to imprisonment or forced birth control.

When he was older, Imam understood why his family had kept him hidden: He was born a fugitive. He and his brother were the youngest of five children, and neither was registered with the government. Imam never received a birth certificate or the all-important household registration required for nearly every facet of life in China, like opening a bank account or obtaining a driver's license. Because he was unregistered, he was never enrolled in an official school. He was educated at home until he was 10, when his father took him into town to live at an underground Islamic school, or madrasa. It was the only place where an unregistered Uyghur child could study.

For decades, the Chinese government had treated Uyghurs as a troublesome population with separatist tendencies. Leaders sought to increase Xinjiang's ethnic Han population through settlement programs. After 9/11 and the start of the United States War on Terror, China declared its own "global war on terror," which intensified the targeting of Uyghurs and other Muslim populations in Xinjiang. When the madrasa was shut down, Imam came home. He helped his parents plant crops in the spring and bundle and thresh the wheat during harvest.

By the time the village authorities became aware of him, he was almost a teenager. There was no immediate punishment, but families with unregistered children were easy to exploit. In 2005, when he was 13, Imam was sent to work on a land-development project in the Taklamakan, part of what was known as the hashar system, a forced-labor program targeting Uyghurs. For two years, he moved earth and built roads, working grueling hours for no pay. When the project was finished, the government gave the land to Han settlers.

Imam had a sharp mind, and his parents wanted him to become an alim — a religious scholar. They sent him to Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, to study Arabic. Two years later, he moved to Hotan, a city famous for its jade industry and as a stop on the ancient Silk Road. It was also — unofficially — a center of Arabic and Islamic learning. Uyghurs from across Xinjiang traveled to Hotan to study in secret at the homes of private scholars, an Islamic revival enabled in part by the spread of wireless internet and smartphones.

It was a brief window of freedom. Not long after Imam left Urumqi, in July 2009, around a thousand people gathered in the capital to protest the mob killing of two Uyghur migrant workers in Guangdong province. The protests devolved into riots where at least 200 people, both Han and Uyghur, were killed. A brutal crackdown on Uyghurs and all expressions of Uyghur culture followed. The government set curfews and disrupted phone and internet services for nearly a year. In 2012, Xi Jinping came to power; he soon began saying in speeches that he would build a "great wall of iron" around Xinjiang. Billions of dollars were invested in surveillance and facial-recognition technologies. New laws turned nearly all Uyghur crimes, from simple theft to protests of land seizures, into acts of terrorism. In Uyghur-majority southern regions, the government deployed armed paramilitary forces with broad powers to detain civilians and search private homes. Raids and arbitrary arrests led to acts of resistance and in some cases violence, with groups of Uyghurs attacking Han civilians.

After 18 people were killed during an apparent attack on a police station, authorities in Hotan began targeting any gatherings of young Uyghur men, even in private homes, and Imam resolved to stay away from trouble. But he was detained one afternoon while walking home from an internet cafe. During an all-night interrogation, police officers showed him printouts of conversations he'd had online in which he discussed moving abroad. They showed him messages from his phone containing references to Islam. When he tried to deny the messages were his, they beat him and made him sign a confession in Chinese, a language he could not read.

Imam was released, but in the coming weeks, the officers began to call him, asking for information about local religious schools. He didn't know what to do. Hotan had become impossible to live in. The government had divided the city into zones and erected fences and checkpoints around each one. Without an ID card, he couldn't take a bus, see a doctor or even cross between districts. After his landlord sold his property and fled the country, Imam came home to Kargilik, but by the end of 2012, checkpoints and full-body searches had arrived there too. His parents' neighbors were selling their homes. He realized he had to find a way out.

By the time Imam made arrangements to leave, thousands of Uyghurs were fleeing China each month. It was the height of an exodus that would soon be cut short by a mass internment drive in Xinjiang in which it is estimated that more than a million Turkic and Muslim people were detained in extrajudicial detention facilities. The borders hardened, and escape became all but impossible. But for a few years before the camps appeared, some families sensed the rising danger.

There was a word for what they were doing: hijrah, sometimes translated as flight or exodus. Most Uyghurs who fled China were trying to reach Turkey, a Muslim country with a large Uyghur diaspora. Until 2012, the path out of Xinjiang led them over mountains through Central Asia, but security agreements that China made with Pakistan and Afghanistan led to arrests and deportations. Around 2013, a new route was established, taking Uyghurs on a dangerous overland crossing through Southeast Asia to Malaysia, where a network of smugglers helped them obtain or forge travel documents to Turkey.

Chinese authorities branded all such migration as "hijrah terrorism" and demanded that other countries arrest and repatriate Uyghur asylum seekers. Their demands have become increasingly difficult to refuse. In the years since the exodus began, China's influence in Southeast Asia — in the form of investments, aid and military agreements — has grown considerably, and

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with it the ability to pursue Uyghurs wherever they may go. As a result, more than a decade after leaving home, many have found neither safety nor refuge. Hundreds have been forcibly returned to China, and hundreds more have been imprisoned or detained for years. They believe the world has abandoned them.

In February 2014, Imam used a friend's ID card to travel to Urumqi, where he bought a same-day train ticket to Guangzhou. It was a 55-hour journey. The train was filled with Han travelers, but there were a few Uyghurs onboard, too. Uyghurs who lived outside Xinjiang had a bad reputation. Imam had heard that most of them were involved in illegal activities: drugs, human trafficking, prostitution. And no matter the reason for traveling, plainclothes police officers were known to follow them. Imam pretended not to notice anyone.

When he arrived, Guangzhou was cold and damp. At the station, he bought a burner phone and a SIM card and called a number his former landlord in Hotan had given him. A man directed Imam to a hotel a short walk away. He checked in and waited.

For 10 days, he left his room only to get food. Every noise outside his door made him jump. On the 11th day, a smuggler whom Imam thought of as the middleman appeared. The middleman told Imam he would be traveling with a group of 20 Uyghurs, all of them guests at the hotel. Imam paid him 30,000 yuan in cash, or about $5,000, which the middleman said would take him as far as Cambodia. Then he would pay more. The middleman cautioned Imam that if he was caught after crossing the border, he should claim to be a citizen of Turkey. The travelers threw away their identity cards and cut away clothing tags with Chinese writing.

The group left Guangzhou that afternoon in two large cars and arrived 10 hours later in Nanning, near the Vietnamese border. The cars were swapped for a large van with no seats inside, only rows of upturned plastic buckets. The smugglers were Han Chinese and spoke no Uyghur, but there was little to say. Somewhere in the night, they began to ascend a mountain. It was raining hard. Halfway up the dirt road, the van got stuck in the mud. They continued on foot into Vietnam. Far beneath them, Imam spotted a border sentry post at the mountain's base.

The descent was treacherous. A mother who was carrying a toddler in her arms slipped and fell, and the boy started wailing. One of the smugglers gestured to the woman to cover the child's mouth. Imam feared the boy would suffocate but said nothing. At the base of the mountain, another set of traffickers was waiting. The group walked through dense, foul-smelling mud. Imam kept slipping until he was filthy. The woman next to him vomited.

They reached a small village at midnight. Imam washed himself at a water spigot. Around dawn, more vans arrived. The drivers were Vietnamese. After a four-hour drive, speaking broken Chinese, they explained that the group had arrived at the Hanoi bus station. They indicated that the station workers would know who they were and would help them buy bus tickets to the Cambodian border.

It all happened as the smugglers promised. After two days and two nights, the bus arrived at the border, and Imam and the others were led through farmland and forest into Cambodia, where more vans were waiting, already packed with migrants. The vans drove through the night and at dawn reached a hotel in the countryside, dirty and crowded, with dozens of people sleeping in the rooms and corridors. Everyone was Uyghur. Imam paid a second fee, about $1,500 in cash, to an armed man in a military uniform. The man gave him a red string and told him to tie it around his wrist — and not to remove it until he arrived in Malaysia.

The next morning, the group was loaded into a convoy of military vans and smuggled into Thailand. It was the easiest border crossing of them all. Whenever they stopped at a checkpoint, the driver would talk with the official and place some money — very beautifully, Imam thought — into the officer's hand. They arrived at a five-story hotel on the outskirts of Bangkok that was just as crowded with Uyghurs as the hotel in Cambodia

Previous pages: Hasan Imam, a Uyghur refugee who spent years in Thai immigration detention centers after being smuggled out of China in 2014. Below: The route that Imam and other refugees intended to take from Urumqi, capital of China's Xinjiang region, toward Turkey.

Uyghurs held at the Sadao detention center scratched a pair of holes through their cell walls in order to escape into the nearby jungle.

had been. Another refugee, who was volunteering to help distribute food in the hotel kitchen, told Imam more than 300 meals were prepared the night before.

Those who made it this far were lucky. Traveling illegally and without documents, Uyghur migrants were vulnerable to extortion and human trafficking. We have spent the past two years investigating the mass exodus of Uyghurs from China, interviewing more than 30 survivors of the smuggling route through Southeast Asia. Stories of deaths and disappearance were common. A woman told us she lost her 4-year-old daughter, who fell from an overcrowded boat in Cambodia and drowned. We heard stories of babies born in squalid safe houses or abandoned at hospitals by parents terrified of arrest and deportation. The fear was well founded. In 2009, Cambodia deported back to China 20 Uyghur migrants who had applied to the United Nations for refugee status, some of whom were later reportedly tried and sentenced to death, according to Human Rights Watch. At the height of the exodus, Uyghurs were deported from Myanmar, shot to death trying to enter Kyrgyzstan and killed at the Vietnam border. Leaving China was no guarantee of safety.

Imam's group spent a week at the hotel. When it was their turn to move, they were taken to a nearby village and directed onto a train heading south. They were now without a guide for the first time. Imam felt nervous, but everything seemed arranged for them in advance. Conductors came walking down the cars to check tickets, but when they saw his red string, they left him alone. Even police officers seemed to understand the strings as a guarantee of safe passage.

The train traveled south through the night to a station near the Malaysian border, where guides came onboard to lead the group along the tracks to cars that drove them to the edge of a forest. They began to walk.

It was evening, and the forest's silence was frightening. There was no road or even a trail, just mud and grass. Empty plastic water bottles were scattered everywhere. Before long, the group arrived at a clearing where hundreds of people were sitting quietly. Everyone wore a piece of colored string around their wrist. Some of the strings were red, others green, blue or yellow. Even newborn babies were tagged. Every face was Uyghur.

On his first night in the clearing, Imam lay on a tarp huddled with another traveler, but he couldn't sleep. The air was chilly — he could see the other man shivering — and the camp smelled of unwashed people. The next day, when a guide ushered a small group of Uyghurs away from the clearing, Imam understood they were all being taken across the border into Malaysia in the same order they had arrived. He had to wait his turn.

The clearing was one of several in the forest, Imam learned. There were hundreds, maybe thousands of Uyghurs nearby, scattered among sickly Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, also trying to reach Malaysia. Every so often,

This page: Photograph by Tuwaedaniya Meringing/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

traffickers returned to move people. Sometimes they brought rice and vegetables, which the Uyghurs would cook over campfires. On one occasion, they brought a cow that the Uyghurs butchered.

But as days passed, the traffickers visited less and less often. When someone asked about the delay, one of them explained that it was now harder to sneak across the border. A Malaysian airplane had disappeared and there were rescue crews in the mountains looking for wreckage. After two weeks, the food ran out, and what little drinking water remained was reserved for children, pregnant women and the infirm. In another clearing, a group was reduced to drinking from a stagnant lake filled with algae. Several people got sick. The red string on Imam's wrist was blackened with dirt.

As night fell on March 12, 2014, news spread that the remaining Uyghurs in Imam's clearing — around 200 people — were going to be guided across the border, all at once. A smuggler led them partway up a steep mountainside on foot. Near the summit, the smuggler instructed them to wait at a rubber plantation, then walked ahead. All at once, there were gunshots. Men and dogs were running toward them. Imam froze.

It was a raid. Thai police officers surrounded the group, and one spoke in English through a loudspeaker. He said they had been tricked by their traffickers and that the police would bring them down the mountain and see where they should go. One of the refugees translated the speech into Uyghur.

On the way down, Imam passed reporters with TV cameras and bright lights. He did everything he could to avoid them, afraid that Chinese authorities would view the broadcasts and recognize his face. Thai news footage of the raid suggests others had the same thought: People stare at the ground or cover their faces in fear.

The Uyghurs were brought before a judge and convicted of entering Thailand illegally. Days later, nearly 200 more Uyghurs were arrested in another raid. Both groups were made up mostly of families traveling together; two-thirds of those detained were women and children. Once they were photographed and sentenced, the families were divided. Most of the women and children were taken to an unguarded shelter near the border. The others, including all of the men and older boys, were taken to an immigration detention center (I.D.C.) called Padang Besar.

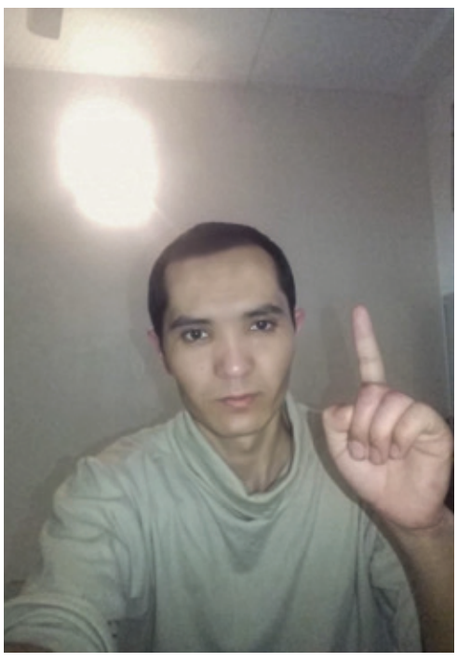
Thailand has long been a hub for human smuggling and trafficking. The year of Imam's flight, the United States downgraded the country to the lowest rating on its annual Trafficking in Persons Report, a global ranking based on compliance with human-trafficking laws published by the State Department. News organizations reported that thousands of people were being trafficked to Malaysia each year. The raids exposed to the world just how sprawling the industry was.

Around a month after Imam's capture, Thailand's government was overthrown by a military junta. Among the new government's stated goals was putting an end to the laxity and corruption that had permitted trafficking to flourish under the old administration. The police later discovered dozens of smuggling camps in the mountain range where Imam was arrested, and more than 30 mass graves of Rohingya migrants. Almost from the moment of their capture, Imam and his fellow detainees were symbols of a disgraced government, an embarrassment to be hidden away.

Coups are something of a national tradition in Thailand. There have been a dozen since the 1932 revolution that established the country's constitutional monarchy, but the junta that came to power in 2014, calling itself the National Council for Peace and Order, was particularly repressive. Authorities arrested protesters, strengthened censorship laws and suspended elections. Thailand's major allies condemned the new government. The United States, for decades Thailand's most important security partner and a major source of investment and trade, suspended millions of dollars in aid, reduced its military cooperation and imposed sanctions. The European Union followed suit.

The withdrawal of support accelerated Thailand's most significant political realignment in decades. The junta made overtures to its neighbors Myanmar and Cambodia, both former adversaries, and, most consequential, pursued new ties with China. In 2013, China became Thailand's largest trading partner for the first time; now the government made explicit its plans to bring the countries closer together. Two weeks after the coup, the junta's leader, Prayuth Chan-ocha, met with Chinese representatives to discuss trading opportunities.

A selfie that Imam took in a safe house in Malaysia to mark his freedom after his escape from Sadao.



China's influence was also apparent in news coverage of the Uyghurs' capture. Despite his attempts to hide from journalists, Imam appeared in a photograph that accompanied a Turkish news story about the arrests. In the article, Chinese officials asserted that those found in the smuggling camp were not Turkish, as they claimed, but Uyghur. "Once we confirm that they are Chinese, they would be sent back to China," the official said.

In a bid to avoid deportation, some detainees at Padang Besar tried to register as asylum seekers with the United Nations. They received no reply. Thai law does not recognize any refugee or asylum status; the country is not a party to the U.N.'s 1951 refugee convention or its 1967 protocol. All asylum seekers are considered illegal migrants, subject to the country's 1979 Immigration Act, which grants authorities nearly unlimited power to detain foreigners caught entering the country improperly. There are few guidelines for how immigration detainees should be treated, and no limit to how long they may be detained. Imam wondered whether it was simply his fate, whether in China or Thailand, to end up behind bars.

At Padang Besar, Imam began to open up about his life for the first time since leaving China. Among his fellow captives was Muhter, a 49-year-old farmer. Although he was much older than Imam, Muhter respected the younger man's erudition. He often asked Imam to explain Quranic verses to him. Sometimes Muhter's son Yolwas would join the discussions. Each man had been traveling with family. Muhter's wife, daughter and younger son and Yolwas's wife had been taken to the government-run shelter and escaped. Because it was unguarded, more than 130 Uyghurs disappeared from the shelter in the weeks and months after the raid, and some, including Muhter and Yolwas's family members, were already in Turkey.

Not all of these new connections would last. Padang Besar was a holding pen, not a prison designed for long-term incarceration. The detainees, including more than 20 young children, were crammed into tight cells with a light that never turned off. About three months after the March raid, the authorities began to distribute some of the Uyghurs among other detention centers, but it remained crowded and unsanitary. In October, a 3-year-old Uyghur boy who had been traveling with strangers became sick with tuberculosis. For two months, despite the appeals of the other

detainees, the boy was kept at the center, and although he was eventually transferred to a hospital, in December he died. (It was the second known death of a Uyghur in Thai detention. In June, a woman gave birth in a detention center to a baby who died two days later.)

After the boy's death, most of the remaining men were taken to a nearby center called Sadao. Before his transfer day, Imam hid his remaining money in the bottom of a container of dates, stuffing the fruit tight in the jar.

Sadao was a prisonlike compound surrounded by high walls. Hundreds of people shared each large, cagelike room. The new arrivals quickly learned that not all detainees were treated the same. Migrants from Bangladesh and Pakistan were held only for a short while before they were returned to their countries of origin. Yet even the Rohingya, another politically sensitive minority group, had more privileges than Uyghurs. They could wear their own clothes and bribe guards for contraband, including cellphones. Alone among the detainees, the Uyghurs were initially made to wear dark orange shirts and black trousers ("like Guantánamo," Imam recalled) and were restricted from using phones. The other detainees possessed ID cards and I.D.C. numbers, neither of which were provided to the Uyghurs. It was as if they didn't exist.

By May 2015, nearly 400 Uyghurs were being held in Thailand. China had continued to demand their return even as a host of human rights organizations appealed for their release. When Turkey's government offered to take in some of the detained, a Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman advised the country to "stop meddling in placement work."

Then, on June 30, without any prior announcement, around 173 detainees, mostly women and children still living in the shelter, were flown to Turkey. At Sadao, the guards told some of the men in Imam's cell that their wives and children had been released. The news was a relief.

A week later, several guards entered Imam's cell and read aloud a list of names from a notebook. The guards explained that these men, around 40 from two adjacent cells, were being sent to Turkey, too. Yolwas was one of them. Watching them leave, Imam felt uneasy, although he couldn't say why. A night passed with no news. The following afternoon, on July 9, word came that the men had not reached Turkey but instead had been deported to China. Cries of despair filled Sadao as the news spread. In Imam's cell, someone fainted.

By purchasing phone time from other detainees, the men in Sadao learned that the same thing had happened at other detention centers. The deportations broke dozens of families apart. Many of the deported had relatives who had been sent to Turkey just one week earlier. Siblings, spouses and even parents and children were separated, for no apparent reason. The Thai government claimed those sent to China were Chinese citizens whereas those sent to Turkey were Turkish, a claim all the Uyghurs knew was absurd. Imam remembers breaking the news to Muhter that his son Yolwas was among the deported. The older man was bereft.

Thailand claimed that the number of Uyghurs deported stood at 109, although our analysis of internal Chinese documents, photographs and information from relatives in Turkey suggests that the number may be as high as 150. The discrepancy engendered rumors in diaspora circles that some of the captured Uyghurs were killed inside Thailand, fears compounded by the fact that none of the identities of the deported were ever released by either country.

Our investigation also reveals that Thai authorities worked closely with China over months to arrange to send the Uyghurs back. Documents we obtained from a public-security bureau in Xinjiang show that Thai authorities sent mug shots of 306 Uyghur adults and 71 children to authorities in China in efforts to identify them, and that Chinese authorities subsequently ordered police units to identify and collect blood samples from detainees' relatives to compare with samples taken from those in Thailand. Even after Turkey's resettlement offer was made public, Thai and Chinese representatives held secret meetings and reached a preliminary agreement "to repatriate 306 Uyghurs to China," suggesting an even larger deportation was planned. These documents, which reveal the extent of the collaboration between Thai and Chinese authorities, are described here for the first time.

The deportations provoked condemnation from representatives of the United States and Turkey. In Istanbul, relatives of the deported broke into the Thai consulate, where they smashed windows and threw stones. Human rights groups warned that the men could be tortured or even executed. In an uncommonly blunt statement, the assistant high commissioner of the U.N.'s refugee agency, U.N.H.C.R., said the office was shocked by the deportations, which he described as "a flagrant violation of international law." According to The Guardian, U.N.H.C.R. had received assurances from Thailand that the Uyghurs would be protected.

Even authorities in China seemed to realize that most of the deported were not criminals. State-affiliated media outlets described all the deportees as "stowaways and 'snakeheads'" but reported that just 13 were fugitives suspected of "involvement in terrorism." In an internal speech delivered that September, China's minister of public security claimed that one-third of the Uyghurs deported from Thailand had traveled "with the intention of joining the 'jihad,'" but no evidence for this figure was given and no charges against any of the deportees were ever announced. They simply disappeared.

Suan Plu, a detention center in Bangkok notorious for its poor living conditions, where 43 Uyghur refugees are still held. One of them says he has not seen the sun in 10 years. (The photo was taken by a former detainee.)

The outrage following the deportations appeared to come as a surprise to Thailand's leaders. But publicly, at least, Prayuth Chan-ocha, now the prime minister, was unmoved. "If we send them back and there is a problem, that is not our problem," he said, adding that China had guaranteed their safety. "If we don't do it this way, then how would we do it? Or should we feed them for another lifetime and let them have children here for another three litters?"

The deportations brought Thailand further into China's orbit. A little over a week earlier, the Royal Thai Navy approved the $1 billion purchase of three Chinese submarines. As for the Uyghurs who remained behind in Thailand — at least 60 men — they were being held, according to a Thai government spokesman, "pending citizenship verification." Once their nationality was confirmed, they would be deported, too. Imam realized that, whether out of indifference or fear, no one was going to save them. They would have to rescue themselves.

Six weeks after the deportations, on Aug. 17, 2015, a bomb exploded at Erawan Shrine, a popular tourist site in the middle of Bangkok, killing 20 people and injuring 125. Prime Minister Prayuth described the bombing as the "worst incident that's ever happened in Thailand."

No one claimed responsibility — to this day, no one has — and authorities initially suggested that political groups who opposed the 2014 coup were to blame. But after two weeks of conflicting reports and investigative dead ends, two Uyghur migrants, Bilal Muhammad and Yusufu Miraeli, were charged with the bombing. Both suspects were held in military prisons and were refused access to legal representation. Both say that they were tortured and that no interpreter was present during interrogations, which took place in English, a language the men did not understand. At different points in the investigation, authorities announced that both men had even confessed to being the same suspect: a man in a yellow shirt whom CCTV footage showed placing the bomb at the shrine. Both men were made to re-enact the bomb's placement while wearing a yellow shirt, two weeks apart, for news stations.

Although the government rejected the idea that the bombing was retribution for the deportations, after the arrests the Uyghurs in detention were perceived as terrorists. When the guards at Sadao came into the cells to conduct searches, the detainees were handcuffed like criminals. Some were afraid the bombings would hasten their expulsion.

Yet life inside Sadao did not otherwise change. Every day for Imam was exactly the same. The men ate, slept and prayed in their cells. Months — then years — passed without event, until one day, in October 2017, more than three years after their arrests, the remaining Uyghur detainees at Sadao were transferred to an auxiliary facility on the detention-center grounds. The main building was being renovated. Imam had not set foot outside since his transfer in January 2015. The yard was filled with debris.

Imam in Turkey in 2024. He has not heard from his family in Xinjiang since he left China more than a decade ago.

The auxiliary building was smaller and felt somehow more punishing. The Uyghurs were divided between two cells separated by a row of metal bars but surrounded by walls made of old concrete. There were two cameras attached to the ceiling. In one corner of each cell stood an open toilet. The men hung blankets around the toilet for privacy. When the guards removed them, the detainees put them back up. Eventually, the guards gave up.

The Uyghurs no longer had other detainees to buy contraband from, so they saved whatever they might use, such as the thick food-grade plastic bags their meals arrived in. The bags were almost like blankets; each could be rolled and stretched. Near the ceiling of Imam's cell was a narrow air vent. Some of the men tied several bags together to form a knotted climbing rope. They would tie the rope to the bars on the vent so that they could climb up and look outside. The guards didn't seem to mind.

The first time Imam peered through the vent, the sunlight stung his eyes. His previous cell had been windowless. He looked out at the bright yard and the high wall that surrounded them. Both the wall and the ground around the building were lined with concertina wire. There was a road beyond the compound where people sped past on motorbikes. On the other side of the road was a lush jungle.

One day, during his turn at the top of the rope, Imam saw a thick nail sticking out of the wall, right at ceiling level, between the bars and the vent. He extracted it. In a barren cell, a two-inch nail was a significant object: a sewing needle, an awl. He hid it under his pillow.

A few days later, Imam palmed the nail and went to the toilet. Because of the blankets the men had hung, the toilet and its surroundings were invisible to the security cameras. He started to scratch at the wall. The concrete crumbled. After 20 minutes, he had made a small hole, enough

Photograph by Sabiha Çimen/Magnum, for The New York Times

for his finger. At the back of the hole he could see brick. He brought another detainee over, a man he trusted. The pair took turns scratching for about two hours, hidden by the blankets. When they sat back, exhausted, a larger patch of brickwork had been exposed. They emerged and told the others what they'd done.

There were other escape attempts before the one planned by Imam. Most were unsuccessful. One early failure involved a hacksaw blade smuggled into Padang Besar by an accomplice. For another, inmates saved pepper seeds from their meals to blow into the eyes of approaching guards. In January 2015, a teenage boy named Anwar escaped Sadao alongside seven other men. One man reached Turkey, but the others were caught in Thailand and jailed. Once he served his sentence, Anwar was returned to Sadao together with another escapee, a man named Bilal, who had been badly beaten in prison. Bilal complained of headaches and sometimes vomited blood. Imam knew the stakes were high.

Soon the Uyghurs in the neighboring cell learned of the plan and started their own hole. They found other tools and shared them through the bars that divided the cells: a spoon, a belt buckle, a bathtub stopper. They dug under the cover of a loud ceiling fan, which meant they could work only during the day, in hourlong shifts, from 8 a.m. until 11 at night when the fan turned off. The mortar between the bricks crumbled easily. The concrete could be pulverized and flushed down the toilet. On the other side of the brick was more concrete, but this gave way, too. After four days, both groups broke through the building exterior.

The night the men planned to escape, the guards lingered around the cells. Imam wondered whether the detainees' behavior over the past few days had aroused suspicion. Finally, around 1:30 in the morning, the guards left, and the men decided to move. They kicked at the last layer of concrete until the hole was large enough to shimmy through. One by one, the men lowered themselves six feet to the ground, using the ropes made of food bags. A blanket was draped over the concertina wire that surrounded the building. Imam was the second through the hole but stopped to hold the blanket tight over the wire for the others behind him. He recalled that Anwar's escape was thwarted because the scent of blood attracted search dogs.

Their plan was to somehow scale the exterior wall, but once they were in the yard, this proved unnecessary. Workers had been installing a new entrance gate, and that night the unfinished gate stood open and unguarded. Imam and the others fled into the forest. Thanks to their stroke of luck, of the 24 people sharing the two cells, 20 managed to escape before the guards arrived. Muhter was among the few who didn't make it out.

In the forest, they scattered. Imam ended up in a group of seven men. They walked all night until just before dawn, around 5 a.m. They heard the day's first call to prayer sound from a nearby mosque and decided to wait and rest until it was dark again.

That night, the men heard cars along a road far beneath them. It sounded like a town. Soon they came to a road and, ahead of them, a checkpoint. Imam realized they were at the Thai-Malaysian border. They were nowhere near a town, and the traffic they heard must have been the authorities searching for them.

The men left the road, where they were sure to be caught. For days, they wandered through the forest, traveling from dusk until dawn. One night, they saw flashlights and heard dogs barking, and lay still on the ground for hours until the sounds of the search party receded. They lost their sense of direction and no longer knew where the border was. They had taken handfuls of dates and biscuits from the detention center, but by the third day of their escape, provisions were running low. Twice, Imam and another escapee, a man named Abdulah who learned some Thai in detention, went into a town to buy food, only to flee back to the forest when locals seemed to recognize them. They drank rainwater.

After the second close call, one man lost his patience and went off alone, leaving the other six behind. In desperation, Imam and Abdulah entered a third town, where, with a combination of baht and dollars from Imam's date jar, they managed to buy a phone, a SIM card and a powerbank from a general store.

The other four rejoiced when the pair returned. With the phone's GPS, the men were able to walk back toward the Malaysian border. They arrived at a river and walked along the bank until they saw tall grass sticking out of the water. They lowered themselves in. On the other side of the river there was a road, which they crossed, and then a mountain, which they climbed. At the summit was a long fence covered with razor wire. They lifted each other over the fence into Malaysia.

Imam woke up in a forest around dawn, delirious with hunger. One member of the group could not stop vomiting. Their hands were covered in cuts from the wire. They found a road and used the phone to call contacts in Turkey. Some said it was too risky to help them — their faces were being broadcast on the news — but one person agreed to forward the number of a smuggler who ran a small grocery store near the border. The smuggler arranged for a meetup at the rear entrance of a nearby mosque.

The house the smuggler took them to was like a dream. Imam had been sure he would die in the forest in Thailand. Here they slept in warm beds and cooked meals together. He took a photograph of himself on the phone he'd bought in Thailand to document this moment of freedom.

From the safe house, the smuggler transported the men to a large apartment in Kuala Lumpur. Two weeks passed, and more men came to the apartment, totaling 11 from the Sadao escape. One night, there was a disturbance downstairs. Imam rushed to the window and saw police cars outside the building. The men scattered. He took refuge in a closet. A violent crack sounded as the apartment door was forced open. Imam was pulled out of the closet and pushed to the ground. He felt the weight of a policeman's boot on his head. Men were screaming. He closed his eyes.

The men were taken to the headquarters of the Royal Malaysia Police, where employees from the Chinese Embassy were waiting for them. Imam and the others referred to themselves by the names they had invented upon leaving China, but the representatives knew their real names, and wrote these down for the Malaysian authorities — all except Imam. They did not know his real name, only the name on a fake driver's license he had sometimes used in Xinjiang.

The men were imprisoned and threatened — once again — with deportation. But unlike in Thailand, human rights lawyers took up their case. They were told that for some of the men, China had requested Interpol red notices — a voluntary system of global law-enforcement arrest warrants — in order to demand their return. During the most frightening moment of their ordeal, they were even taken to an immigration office near the airport to be sent to China but persuaded authorities to return them to detention. Two months after this near-deportation, they received travel documents from Turkey, and finally, on Oct. 9, 2018, after nearly a year in Malaysia, all 11 of the men were taken back to the airport in Kuala Lumpur. The police cars drove with their sirens on, and the men were chained together like prisoners. Imam wondered: Had it been a trick? Were they being sent to China after all? Some of the men began to cry.

But when they arrived at the airport, their chains were removed. They boarded a Turkish Airlines flight to Istanbul. When other passengers began to board, the men asked them where they were going, just in case.

After Imam's escape, there were still more than 50 Uyghurs in detention in Thailand. According to human rights experts, China continued to demand their deportation. If Thailand was reluctant to risk another international uproar by deporting the men, it was equally hesitant to defy China by releasing them. Instead, authorities divided and shuffled the Uyghurs among I.D.C.s across the country, letting their desperation grow. We found evidence of more than a dozen escape attempts over their years of detention. None were as successful as Imam's, but on July 11, 2022, three detainees, including Anwar, escaped from a center near the Myanmar border. Anwar and another man reached Turkey. On seeing the news, Imam immediately recognized them as his former cellmates.

Every jailbreak brought the Uyghurs media attention and renewed calls for their release. Anwar's was a final embarrassment for the

immigration bureau. The remaining Uyghur detainees were transferred to Suan Plu, the largest I.D.C. in Thailand, an unobtrusive building set back from a busy road in central Bangkok.

Suan Plu is notorious throughout Thailand for its poor living conditions. Its cells are noisy, unhygienic and dangerous. According to former detainees, powerful cell leaders, imbued with authority by Thai guards, issue beatings for perceived infractions. There are reports of overcrowding so severe that some detainees must sleep sitting up.

At Suan Plu, the Uyghurs are routinely denied access to visitors and legal aid, and many are in poor health. They complain of anal bleeding, urinary tract pain, back pain and severe malnutrition. Several of them can no longer walk. Apart from infrequent visits to a small nurse's station, they are confined to their crowded cells 24 hours a day.

From an unofficial list of the Uyghurs still trapped in Thailand, Imam recognized 21 as former cellmates. One name, however, was missing. When he reached Turkey, Imam learned that Bilal, the man who complained of headaches following a prison beating, died about six months after the breakout from Sadao. There was virtually no media coverage of his death, nor any statement from the Thai government.

Two other deaths are more recent. On Feb. 11, 2023, a 49-year-old detainee at Suan Plu named Aziz Abdullah died of pneumonia. Abdullah and his family were arrested alongside Imam during the 2014 raid. Although his brother was deported to China, Abdullah's wife and children escaped and reached Turkey. According to his family, he was vomiting blood for more than a week before his death but was refused treatment. Two months later, on April 21, another detainee, Muhammad Tursun, died. The official cause of death was given as respiratory and circulatory failure. Like Abdullah's, Tursun's wife and children were resettled in Turkey. Both men were held back for reasons that have never been explained.

Unlike Bilal's death years earlier, the deaths of two detainees in just over two months were widely reported and condemned by human rights groups. The state-run National Human Rights Commission of Thailand conducted an investigation into the Uyghurs' treatment. Although the commission was refused access to the Uyghurs' cells, its report confirmed details of their poor living conditions, and concluded that their indefinite detention constituted a human rights violation. The chairwoman of the commission also made a series of candid recommendations concerning the Uyghurs in a letter we obtained, addressed to Thailand's prime minister, which has not been made public. Dated April 2023, the letter confirms that Uyghurs are forbidden contact with relatives, lawyers or other advocates, and subject to a different standard of care than other detainees. The letter also revealed the existence of "countries that are ready to take these detainees to settle down" and urged the relevant agencies to find a pathway to the Uyghurs' resettlement. Similar urgings followed in a letter sent to the Thai government in February of this year by eight U.N. officials.

The Thai government has held firm. In March, on the 10th anniversary of the raid in which many of the detainees were arrested, Thailand's minister of foreign affairs, Panpree Phahitthanukorn, in response to a journalist's question, defended their long incarceration. "They entered Thailand illegally and they have to face the legal process," he said, without elaborating on when that process might end. Criticism of the government, or any suggestion that Thailand was afraid of China, he added, would not affect the decision at all.

After reaching Turkey, Imam joined a community of Uyghur exiles, including several survivors of the smuggling route, and he kept up with each new tragedy in Thailand. He was especially concerned about Muhter, the older prisoner who would often listen to his Quranic commentary, and who was now in Suan Plu. Muhter's family had been torn apart by their flight: his wife, his younger son and his daughter, Aynur, reaching Turkey while his older son, Yolwas, was deported to China. But there was another reason Imam often thought of Muhter. A year and a half after reaching Turkey, he married Aynur, and his former cellmate became his father-in-law.

No one knows how many people have fled Xinjiang over the past 15 years. In the course of our reporting, we obtained an internal Chinese government document that suggests the scale of the exodus: a spreadsheet created sometime before 2018, titled "High-Risk Individuals From Xinjiang Suspected of Crossing the Border Illegally," containing the names and personal details of 17,743 Uyghurs — including many of our interviewees and more than two dozen of the men currently detained at Suan Plu.

In their decade-long search for a safe haven outside China, tens of thousands of asylum seekers have been met with cruelty and indifference. Far from protecting them from refoulement, host countries have, in hundreds of cases, bent to China's demands to repatriate them. Thousands more have been subjected to local imprisonment, intimidation and other forms of transnational repression. There is no population in the world subject to such aggressive tactics of surveillance and pursuit on a global scale.

Deportations slowed in 2018 in response to a growing awareness of China's abuses in Xinjiang. When Malaysia permitted Imam to fly to Turkey with 10 of his fellow escapees, it seemed to be a turning point in the international treatment of Uyghur refugees. The previous year, Malaysia deported several Uyghurs to China. But as conditions in Xinjiang became

more widely known, the government declared it would no longer send Uyghurs back. In 2019, Sweden became the first country to allow Uyghurs from Xinjiang to claim asylum based on their membership in a persecuted group, rather than individual circumstances.

Yet other countries have been slow to follow suit. In February 2023 Canada announced that it would accept 10,000 Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims without legal status. None have yet been resettled. And although the United States has declared the persecution of Uyghurs in China to be a genocide, few have found refuge here. As many as 1,000 are waiting for the results of their asylum applications, according to U.H.R.P.

And in many places, China remains able to leverage its considerable influence. In recent years Uyghurs have been deported to China from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. Some of these deportations followed the issuing of Interpol red notices at China's request, although Interpol forbids their use in cases of political persecution. In 2021, a Uyghur man was arrested in Morocco based on a red notice issued by China that critics called abusive, and that Interpol subsequently revoked, although he remains imprisoned. As recently as 2023, the European Court of Human Rights ordered Malta to halt the planned deportation of a Uyghur couple whose asylum applications had been rejected. And in Turkey, thousands of Chinese Uyghurs remain at risk of deportation. Some relatives of the men at Suan Plu told us they are too afraid to speak out lest they lose their residence status. In 2019, Turkey deported four Uyghurs to Tajikistan, from where they were sent to China. "Uyghurs aren't really safe anywhere," Peter Irwin, a researcher with U.H.R.P., says.

In Thailand, even after five deaths in detention, the release of the surviving Uyghurs — 43 held in Suan Plu; five more serving sentences in a Bangkok prison for crimes related to a 2019 escape attempt — seems as distant as ever. Thailand's ties to China have grown markedly in the decade that the Uyghurs have languished in detention. Since 2020, China has ranked as Thailand's largest direct foreign investor. The two countries have also deepened their military ties with expanded joint training exercises and nearly a dozen major arms deals. According to multiple sources who have mediated with government officials on the Uyghurs' behalf, Thailand is under substantial pressure from the Chinese government concerning all aspects of their treatment. "Thailand considers this a top security issue," Chalida Tajaroensuk, the chairwoman of the People's Empowerment Foundation, a civil society NGO, says.

If it is true, as some legal experts believe, that the Uyghurs will not be moved until a verdict is reached in the Erawan Shrine bombing trial, they are likely to be waiting for years. The trial of the two Uyghur defendants has limped along for nearly a decade, pausing during changes in government and pandemic lockdowns. When we spoke with the defendants' lawyers last year, hundreds of witnesses for the prosecution were still waiting to testify. Trial sessions are routinely observed by representatives of the Chinese government. In December 2023, the International Federation for Human Rights and the International Commission of Jurists petitioned the U.N. to redress "numerous violations of human rights and due process" in the arrest and trial of the defendants, citing discrimination that reflected a "pattern of persecution of Uyghurs in Thailand."

U.N.H.C.R., the U.N. agency that supports asylum seekers at camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border, may have the best chance of navigating the quagmire. But U.N.H.C.R.'s track record with Uyghur asylum seekers is poor. According to a 2023 U.H.R.P. report, the agency is often "unable to provide meaningful protection to Uyghur refugees." Although they can visit and register other detainees at Suan Plu, U.N.H.C.R. has no access to the Uyghurs. In May 2024, an investigation published in The New Humanitarian found that U.N.H.C.R. had for years "rebuffed requests from the Thai government" to take a more active role in facilitating the Uyghurs' release. Its report mentions one internal U.N.H.C.R. document that described a "risk of negative repercussions on U.N.H.C.R.'s operation in China," citing projects valued at $7.7 million.

Responding to the report, a U.N.H.C.R. representative told The New Humanitarian, "At no stage have we been permitted to access the group or engage with the caseload for the purpose of facilitating solutions." When reached for comment, a U.N.H.C.R. spokesman told us that U.N.H.C.R. is "deeply concerned" about the Uyghurs' prolonged detention, but because of confidentiality constraints was not in a position to publicly detail its approach to the situation.

Ultimately, only Thailand's government has the power to end the Uyghurs' detention. In recent years, a handful of politicians from opposition parties have stumped for their release. In June 2023, speaking at a Refugee Day panel, the Parliament member Kannavee Suebwang lamented that, unless action is taken, "they will die in detention, with no future." Yet such public dissent is unusual, and in the absence of foreign pressure to counteract China's, intervention seems unlikely.

With no access to the outside world, the Uyghurs at Suan Plu have resorted to smuggling messages to relatives and advocates. We communicated with several current detainees, one of whom said he had not seen sunlight in 10 years. He sent regular updates about worsening conditions in Suan Plu and described the 2023 deaths as a turning point in their desperation. "The two deaths could have been prevented if they had taken them to doctors," he told us. "We begged them, but they just ignored it." Then, in March 2024, two Uyghur men broke out of the center. They were recaptured the next day, and Thailand has released no information about the escape, but as a result, conditions appear to have further deteriorated. "Now there's chaos in the I.D.C.," the detainee told us in March. "I may not be able to contact you for a while." He told us he wanted the outside world to know he was still alive and desperate for help. "I don't want to die here," he said. "I don't want to be buried in a grave that doesn't have my name on it." Since then, there has been only silence.

In Turkey, Imam remains free. He earned his driver's license — an ID he never thought he would possess — and found a job as a truck driver. His sense of freedom is rare. Because they are routinely threatened by Chinese authorities, most Uyghurs who leave China are unwilling to discuss their escape. Among the dozens of survivors we interviewed, many spoke on the condition of anonymity. Other former detainees, including Aynur and a man who escaped alongside Imam, asked to be referred to by first names or nicknames in order to protect relatives. Imam agreed to share his story in part because he believes there are no records of his life in China. He is a man with no past.

Imam and Aynur have three young daughters, but the family still feels small. Muhter's absence is palpable, and Aynur has no information about the fate of her brother Yolwas, nor is anything else known about the Uyghurs deported from Thailand in 2015. The Chinese government has imposed prison sentences ranging from six to 20 years for other Uyghurs who crossed the border illegally in 2013 and 2014, according to a conviction database we obtained from a public-security bureau. Some are charged with "participating in terrorist organizations." Lengthy sentences have also been handed down to family members and friends of those who fled China. Imam has not heard from his family in Xinjiang in more than a decade. Are they safe? Do they know he is alive? Will they ever meet his children?

During his first year living in Turkey, Imam had nightmares constantly. Sometimes he couldn't make himself wake up, and then, when he finally did, he was covered in sweat. He would look around his strange room. It would take a long time for his heartbeat to slow down again. Even then, he was too afraid to fall back asleep.

"It was an endless wait," Imam says of his years in detention. "The fear that we could be deported to China at any time was a constant torment." To be returned meant not only prison or possibly death. It also meant that everyone he loved would be punished. The men thought about that moment of return all the time: what to admit, and how to admit it, so that the authorities wouldn't hurt their families. "Sometimes we tried to cheer each other up, talk about happy things, and we would even sometimes laugh," Imam says. "But deep down, we knew it was a fragile joy." ◆