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The Case of the Missing Uighur

How did a passport-less former Guantanamo detainee escape from Palau and avoid China's clutches?

By DAVID WALTER

Koror, Palau

The Pacific island republic of Palau, population 20,000, feels more like a small town than a country. So when a resident disappears, it makes the local papers. When that resident is Adel Noori—an exonerated former Guantanamo detainee who's still wanted by China for ethnic separatism—it's also international news.

Last month, the Miami Herald reported that Mr. Noori escaped to Turkey in November. But the details remained a mystery. How did a stateless man with no passport escape from the geographical equivalent of a locked room?

Last week, two prominent Palauans—the country's former president and the head of Palau Community College—told me more of the story. A small group of locals and Uighur émigrés planned for months to get Mr. Noori out. This group, they say, procured a genuine Chinese passport to slip Mr. Noori, disguised as a businessman, through three other countries' airports without alerting Beijing's security apparatus.

The stakes were high, since by leaving Palau Mr. Noori risked falling into Chinese hands. Last December, China convinced Malaysia to repatriate six Uighur men who had already registered as refugees with the United Nations. They have not been heard from since.

Uighur activists denounce China for turning their homeland of Xinjiang, in northwest China, into a security state that tramples on locals' Muslim faith. Beijing says that such activists are terrorists or separatists or both.

Concerns over Chinese brutality brought Adel Noori to Palau in October 2009, along with five others who had been captured in Afghanistan and held in Guantanamo since 2002. The U.S. acknowledged as early as 2004 that a total of 22 Uighurs in Guantanamo had nothing to do with the Taliban or al Qaeda.

Sending the Uighurs back to China was out of the question, since they would be imprisoned or even

Kyodo/Associated Press

Adel Noori in March 2012.

executed. The Bush and Obama administrations asked scores of countries to take in the Uighurs, but Beijing threatened to cut economic ties with any that agreed. Only a few small countries, such as Palau, Bermuda and Albania, accepted the U.S. request.

Johnson Toribiong, Palau's president from 2009 to this January, says he had security worries: "I was concerned about the Chinese sending saboteurs to kill them." But the U.S. promised that the Uighurs' resettlement in Palau would be temporary. Mr. Toribiong figured that meant six months to a year.

But no other country has since stepped forward to take Palau's six Uighurs. Palau is running out of the $600,000 the U.S. gave to cover resettlement costs and monthly stipends. And with few jobs and a close-knit Christian population, Palau is an unattractive place for someone like Adel Noori to settle permanently, Mr. Toribiong acknowledges.

Patrick Tellei, president of Palau Community College, says that Mr. Noori told him he had become a trader in Afghanistan and central Asia after fleeing Chinese persecution. Unlike most of Asia, prewar Afghanistan was one place where Chinese Uighurs didn't have to fear deportation. Many went there in hopes of finding work and a way to escape to the West.

In Palau, Mr. Noori, like the other Uighurs, worked nights as a security guard. By 2012, Palau's Uighur population had grown to 20 as the men were joined by their wives. Their children, some born on the island, gave the men a reason to live, says Rushan Abbas, an American who translated for the men in Guantanamo and Palau.

"They're so into their babies, watching them always," Ms. Abbas says. But the extra mouths to feed made the Uighurs' financial situation untenable.

Adel Noori's wife and two children came to Palau in early 2011, but left by the end of the year, Mr. Tellei says. He adds that it was then that Mr. Noori began working to get his travel documents and find a way out. "And he demanded to go. He *demanded*," says Mr. Toribiong.

Of all the Uighurs in Palau, Mr. Noori was also best connected to the Uighur diaspora. During Rushan Abbas's first shift translating for Mr. Noori in Guantanamo, she recalls, the detainee shocked her by calling her name. They had never met before, but he remembered her broadcasts for Radio Free Asia. "He knows a lot of people," Ms. Abbas says. "He has been very active for Uighur human rights."

There were several false starts to Mr. Noori's escape, Mr. Tellei says. An idea to smuggle the Uighurs out on the airplane of a visiting Middle Eastern royal fell through. So did a plan to transport Mr. Noori into and out of Japan during the World Uighur Congress in Tokyo last May.

Eventually it was decided to attempt an Argo-style exfiltration. Mr. Noori would dress as a businessman and fly on commercial flights to Turkey, which is an unofficial safe harbor for Uighur refugees. He would have two hours-long stopovers, in Asia and the Middle East.

Mr. Noori arrived at Palau's sleepy airport one day in November, passport in hand. Mr. Tellei says he held Mr. Noori's passport until departure, and that it was the genuine Chinese article.

How did they get it? "It's a big country," Mr. Tellei says cryptically, and Mr. Noori had seven or eight different aliases. In Palau he was known as Zafar Arslan.

The "businessman" boarded his plane with luggage vetted to meet the carry-on requirements of all the countries he passed through, Mr. Tellei says. Mr. Noori was told to create no fuss, attract no attention. President Toribiong says he received regular phone updates on Mr. Noori's progress throughout the day until he reached his family in Turkey.

Mr. Noori's great escape is only part of the story, however. Five other Uighurs and their families remain in Palau, and they are struggling.

I meet Ahmad Tourson around sunset and we drive to a pier on Palau's main island of Koror. A group of teenagers next to us jumps into the Pacific and splashes around. "You come at first, see the view and think, everything's beautiful," he says. "But for us, [after] more than three years, it is not still beautiful."

Mr. Tourson tells me that he came to Palau with three shirts, a few books, family photos and a prosthetic limb. He lost a leg to crossfire while being held prisoner by the Northern Alliance. He says he was captured after he fled Kabul to find an Uzbek haven for his family. When he was in Guantanamo, Mr. Tourson says, Chinese interrogators told him, "If we take you back, we can make you speak."

A petroleum engineer by trade, Mr. Tourson now makes $400 monthly as a security guard. He said that amount, plus a shrinking government stipend, cannot support his family of four. Halal food alone costs $500 monthly. His electricity gets cut every few weeks, and he faces eviction once his three-year, U.S.-funded apartment lease expires.

Mr. Tourson says he tries not to think about the future. It's too uncertain.

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