

The story of Umi Saodah: Tortured and trapped in war-torn Palestine

"I'm still angry and cannot forget what they have done to me," Umi Saodah, a 34-year-old, recalled. It's still crystal clear in her mind how four family members of her employer tortured her two years ago. "They showed no mercy. If they were living here in Indonesia, I would retaliate," she said.

The migrant worker was punched by her Palestinian employers in their house in Gaza, Palestine where she was working as a migrant domestic worker for the family. Her head was banged against a wall for something she denied ever having done. Saodah was accused of stealing jewelry. The family then locked her in her room for a week. Not able to bear the torture any longer, Saodah told her employer to report the theft to the police.

A policeman who was a friend of her employer, then picked her up and brought her to the police station. Saodah was detained in the Saraya Reform and Rehabilitation Center in November 2008, without any official charge. The police could not find any evidence of the alleged theft reported by her employer. While still processing the case, the police contacted the Indonesian Embassy in Cairo, Egypt. An officer from the Embassy met Saodah and promised to inform her family in Indonesia.

However, before Saodah was able to contact her family, much of Gaza city, including the police detention center, were destroyed by Israeli bombardments. In January 2009, the Palestinian Authority closed the detention center as Israeli soldiers had blocked the access streets to it. Before the Israeli authorities emptied the center and evacuated the detainees, Saodah and the other detainees had run away to safety.

"I then lived on the street like a beggar. Really, like a beggar. I had no money and I was begging for days, asking everybody on the street for food. I kept saying I'm hungry, please give me food," she recalled pleading. "I can never forget it," she said, shaking her head.

One day, she met a woman who offered her a place at her home. While staying there, she helped her clean the house which had been partly destroyed by an Israeli bomb attack. Meanwhile the bomb attacks continued. "At first I was afraid of the bomb explosions. But when I saw my new employer was not scared, I got used to it too."

She had to move to another house with the family, when bombs hit the area where they were living. After staying in the house for a few days, Saodah met the policeman who had processed her alleged theft case. "He was actually looking for me after the bomb attack which destroyed the police station." The policeman told Saodah that an official from the Indonesian Embassy wanted to pick her up and return her to Indonesia.

Yet, she refused to leave Gaza until her former employer had paid her salary of about US\$2,000. "I have worked far from my country. I don't want to go home empty handed. I want my money," she insisted. "I'd rather die here than return home without money. I'm a poor person."

A few days later, the policeman visited Saodah again and told her that he had met Saodah's former employer. According to the officer, the employer only gave \$750 to him and asked him to give the money to Saodah. She did not believe him and refused to go. "I don't believe it came from my employer. I don't know where the money came from. I want my salary of US\$2,000."

The Indonesian Embassy in Cairo also asked her to leave Palestine for her safety. "Pak Abdullah from the Embassy said that my salary could be processed later. The most important thing is that I should leave the city," Saodah remembered. Yet, she refused. "I changed my mind when he started mentioned about my mother. He said that my mother had asked for me to go home. I could not resist anymore and agreed to go home."

All the memories just rushed back to her. She remembered her mother waiting at her house in Tlawongan hamlet, Karang Tengah, Tuntang, Semarang, Central Java. She remembered her husband, Puad, who had given her permission to work overseas in order to improve the economy of the family. She also remembered the time she was accompanied by her middleman, Saripudin, from her neighboring village of Cadang Pinggang and went to Jakarta in January 2007.

She was told that she would be employed in Kuwait. "Kuwait was just the official destination and I was actually deployed to Gaza. I accepted because I needed the job. I was just a poor worker from a poor family. I know nothing and I just wanted to work," Saodah, who is educated to elementary school level, said.

To date, she never received her unpaid salary. Yet, she refuses to be beaten by her horrific experience. She is now leading a union for families and migrant workers who become victims of injustice and abuse in their jobs overseas. "I know how it feels to be stranded overseas, to have your rights violated and to be abused. The union is cooperating with other relevant organizations to help migrant workers and their families fight for

their rights, such as unpaid salaries," she exclaimed. (*)