

WORLD

‘For justice’: Yazidi Canadian survivor details years of ISIS slavery in French court

The 32-year-old mother and Canadian citizen was giving evidence in the prosecution of a high-ranking French member of the Islamic State terrorist group charged with genocide and crimes against humanity.

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An image taken on March 10, 2015 from a video reportedly released by an Islamic State group, shows the French jihadist Sabri Essid as he addresses the camera at an undisclosed location. Essid is being tried in absentia before the Paris Assize Court.

— AL-FURQAN MEDIA/AFP via Getty Im

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By Allan Woods Staff Reporter

Three horrifying years as a slave of ISIS recounted over three hours in a Paris courtroom.

Asked why she had come to France from her new home in Canada to share her ordeal of violence, rape and loss of freedom and power, Aveen, who testified Thursday under a pseudonym, didn't hesitate.

“For justice.”

Dressed in a brown jacket and blue jeans with her long hair tied back in a red-and-gold hair clip, the 32-year-old mother and Canadian citizen was giving evidence in the prosecution of a high-ranking French member of the Islamic State terrorist group charged with genocide and crimes against humanity.

The charges against Sabri Essid, a Toulouse native who has not been seen or heard from since 2016, relate to his alleged involvement in the enslavement, torture, rape and persecution of the Yazidi minority of northern Iraq.

Essid is being tried in absentia, with a judgment in France's first-ever such case expected on Friday.

The allegations date to Aug. 3, 2014, when members of the terrorist group launched an attack on the Yazidi-majority communities around Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq. They were seeking to extend their control over regions of Iraq and neighbouring Syria and the terrorist group's self-proclaimed Islamic caliphate.

The attacks displaced tens of thousands of Yazidis who were considered by ISIS to be idolaters and devil worshippers, the court has heard.

Hundreds were summarily executed. Captives were forced to convert to Islam. Young Yazidi boys were indoctrinated and trained to become the next generation of ISIS fighters. The Yazidi women and girls were held captive and sold into sexual slavery.

Aveen was 21 years old, married since 2010 and the mother of a little girl who was not yet two years old, when ISIS arrived in her village of Wardiya that August 2014 morning at around 10 a.m.

There was panic and chaos as the fighters threatened some, killed others, laid siege to the Yazidi territory and caused a humanitarian emergency. Aveen and her daughter were temporarily separated from her husband and were forcibly displaced by ISIS fighters to the village of Tal Afar, about halfway between her home and the Iraqi city of Mosul.

There began what felt like an interminable horror.

They were held captive, forced to convert to Islam, transported from one town to another, observing helplessly as the youngest and most attractive Yazidi women were spirited away to serve the sexual desires of the men who picked and paid for them.

Her sister disappeared. Her aunt went too. She was reunited with her husband along the way, only for him to vanish for good when the men were forced into a local mosque and the women into a school building.

It was while she was being shuttled between one of several prisons in Raqqah, ISIS's Syrian capital, that she came to the haunting realization: "I knew that my turn was coming."

That's what happened in the city of Deir Ezzor where she and other Yazidi women were confined to the second level of a building occupied by ISIS fighters.

Aveen learned she was pregnant and was given medicine that provoked a miscarriage. Another woman tried unsuccessfully to end her life by jumping from a window.

One day, they were rounded up and taken to the local slave market, sized up by a group of jihadists.

"They looked at us and made their choice," she testified.

There was a bidding war between two high-ranking members. The winner sold his gun and car to purchase Aveen and told her: "I bought you to have your daughter."

He changed her name to "Leila," held her at a house separate from his wife and family, and visited every two days on average for sex. Frequently, he left with Aveen's daughter, whose name he changed to "Iman."

"When he wanted to take my daughter and I refused he punched and kicked me," she testified. One day, she screamed so loudly that the neighbours grew worried.

"At that time ... he said I would never see her again."

After a few months, her captor said he could no longer afford her upkeep and sold her to the losing bidder from the slave market. That man, she testified, was Essid, known by the ISIS nom de guerre of Abu Dujanah-al-Faransi.

Essid came for sex every day and at all hours. He even took pills to increase his sexual stamina, a piece of evidence confirmed by Essid's wife, who is not on trial in the current case.

The wife, testifying under a pseudonym on Wednesday, said that her own 12-year-old son from a previous relationship was taken by Essid in 2015 and forced to execute an ISIS hostage. The killing was filmed and turned into one of the terror group's many propaganda videos.

When Essid bought Aveen, he did not purchase her daughter, though she was allowed to see the girl occasionally.

She protested desperately during a 15-day period when she was not allowed to see her daughter by slashing at her arms, forcing a trip to the hospital and a family reunion of sorts.

But Essid soon decided to sell Aveen. He took her to a local beauty salon where she was powdered, primped, primed and photographed for potential buyers, before eventually being sold to the local ISIS emir, or prince.

She was held by this man along with two other Yazidi women and two children. Aveen said he brutalized her physically and sexually, before selling the three of them to an Iraqi man she identified only as Saddam, who was the fourth of eight total captors.

The final man held her for 11 months before heading out to fight. This presented Aveen, her daughter and another female Yazidi slave with a chance to flee.

She was able to make telephone contact with someone who arrived in a taxi to pick them up and drive them, hidden under flowing black robes and the niqab face covering, to a village near Raqqa.

When the sun set for the day, they set off on foot and walked through the night. They reached territory controlled by Kurdish forces at sunrise the next day.

It was Nov. 25, 2017.

Aveen left for Canada three months later (her lawyer asked that her new hometown be withheld) and now works in a restaurant. Her daughter is 13 years old.

"I'm in Canada for my daughter, but my husband is not there and it's not our country," she testified.

She is also far from her family and from the life she once knew — the one that was taken from her, the one she can never get back.

“We were not a family that was very rich,” she said of that old life, a life before the arrival of terror. “But we were very happy.”



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