

ISSUE BRIEF: TOXIC EXPOSURES AT KARSHI-KHANABAD (K2)

The Situation

- Karshi-Khanabad Air Base, known as K2, is a former Soviet air base in southeastern Uzbekistan that shares a border with northern Afghanistan. Over 15,000 U.S. service members were deployed to the U.S. established Camp Stronghold Freedom at K2, which was used to support combat missions from 2001 to 2005.
- While it was a Soviet air base, K2 contained chemical weapons, enriched uranium and soil saturated with fuels and other solvents that formed a “black goo.” Air samples at the base found elevated levels of tetrachloroethylene as well as the residuals of chemical weapons including cyanide in the showers. Other health assessment tests found the base had elevated levels of volatile organic compounds and total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH) were detected at numerous locations throughout Stronghold Freedom. A 2002 assessment recommended not to dig “into soil contaminated with jet fuel, but those areas were populated with tents soldiers slept in and aircraft hangars, according to the declassified document. In the same year, another DOD health risk assessment found between 50 and 75% of personnel at Stronghold Freedom would be exposed to elevated levels of TPH.
- A U.S. Army study from 2015 found that veterans exposed at K2 have a 500% increased likelihood of developing cancer to include malignant melanoma and neoplasms of the lymphatic and hematopoietic tissues.

The Challenge

- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) does not recognize service at K2 as exposure to any of the listed exposures; thus, there are no presumptives or a concession of exposure for these veterans. However, in April 2020, VA confirmed it will study health trends among the thousands exposed.
- In July 2020, DOD shared documents with Congress that revealed the Pentagon knew troops were exposed to hazards at K2, yet VA does not recognize exposures at K2. Subsequently, thousands of veterans do not qualify for VA health care and experience significant difficulties in establishing service connection for diseases potentially related to the exposures.

The Solution

- As many K2 veterans do not have access to health care, they are suffering and dying without the advantage of VA health care. Congress should enact legislation to grant K2 veterans eligibility to VA health care by expanding the definition of toxic exposures in 38 U.S.C. Section 1710.
- VA and Congress need to expedite all studies concerning K2 veterans’ exposures and the negative long-term health impacts. In many instances, these men and women cannot wait due to the significant increase of cancers.

- Congress by statute, or VA by regulation, needs to recognize the toxic exposures at K2 and concede exposure to all of the identified toxins. This would remove barriers for direct service connection and allow K2 veterans to establish benefits without waiting for the VA and the scientific community to establish potential presumptive diseases.