

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, which shares a border with northern Afghanistan. Over 15,000 U.S. service members were deployed to 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 Department of Defense (DoD) health risk assessment found between 50% and 75% of personnel at Stronghold Freedom would be exposed to elevated levels of TPH.
- A 2015 U.S. Army study 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 toxins; thus, there are no presumptive conditions or a concession of exposure for these veterans. However, in April 2020, the 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 toxic hazards at K2, yet the 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.
- In the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act., enacted into law in August 2022, veterans who served at K2 are now considered to be exposed to burn pits/particulate matter. This includes health care and presumptive benefits. However, all of the toxic exposures specific to K2 are still not recognized by the VA or part of the PACT Act.

The Solution

- In accordance with DAV Resolution No. 126, DAV urges Congress to establish a concession of exposure for all veterans who served at K2. While the PACT Act includes K2 veterans in the burn pit presumptive diseases, the VA has still not recognized the other toxic exposures and potential diseases unique to K2.
- The PACT Act requires the creation of the Toxic Exposures Research Work Group to research and study toxic exposures and associated negative health impacts. We urge the Secretary of Veterans' Affairs and the work group to include K2 as one of the research activities to expedite actions in establishing presumptive diseases.