

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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March 4, 2020

The Honorable Robert L. Wilkie
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

The Subcommittee on National Security is investigating potential adverse health effects associated with toxic hazards and exposures at Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Air Base in Uzbekistan.

On January 13, 2020, the Committee wrote to you requesting information on this matter.¹ Unfortunately, the response from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has been inadequate. Veterans who deployed to K2 in Operation Enduring Freedom served bravely in defense of the United States, yet many of them have not received answers to their legitimate questions about the potential hazards they may have been exposed to while deployed there.

On February 27, 2020, the Subcommittee on National Security held a hearing to receive testimony from U.S. Air Force Master Sergeant Paul Widener, Jr. (ret.) and U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer-2 Scott Welsch (ret.), two veterans who previously deployed to K2 and have each suffered from cancer. The Subcommittee also heard testimony from Ms. Kim Brooks, the wife of U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Timothy Brooks, who believes the contaminants her husband was exposed to at K2 contributed to his cancer diagnosis and death in 2004.

During the hearing, Mr. Widener testified that he is aware of 400 veterans who have been diagnosed with cancer since they were deployed to K2 and are seeking restitution from the VA:

Our nation's bravest warriors are sick and dying from their service at K2. ... There are K2 veterans who will not see 2021 from this side of the grave. We beg for you to right this injustice.²

¹ Letter from Chairwoman Carolyn B. Maloney, Committee on Oversight and Reform, and Chairman Stephen F. Lynch, Subcommittee on National Security, to Secretary Robert Wilkie, Department of Veterans Affairs (Jan. 13, 2020) (online at <https://oversight.house.gov/news/press-releases/oversight-committee-seeks-information-related-to-hazardous-conditions-at>).

² Committee on Oversight and Reform, Subcommittee on National Security, Testimony of Paul B. Widener, *Karshi-Khanabad: Hazardous Exposures and Effects on U.S. Servicemembers* (Feb. 27, 2020) (online at

Mr. Welsch also testified:

K2 veterans deserve to know what we were exposed to so that along with our doctors, we can take steps to preserve our health as best as 7,000 service members exposed to dozens of toxins and radioactive materials can.³

Because LTC Brooks passed away while on active duty, Ms. Brooks and her family received VA Disability and Indemnity Compensation, as well as Social Security benefits and military healthcare that enabled her to support her family. However, Ms. Brooks testified:

It has been over 15 years since we lost Tim, but it is newly devastating to learn that there are so many other veterans, spouses, parents, and children going through the same pain and loss that my family did *without* the support of their government, simply because these veterans had the “bad luck” to get sick after they left service.⁴

Despite the growing body of evidence of potential adverse health effects U.S. servicemembers and veterans are experiencing following their service at K2, the VA does not appear to be treating this matter with the urgency and sensitivity it deserves.

On February 14, 2020, the VA responded to the Committee’s January 13, 2020, letter, stating: “There is no presumption associated with K-2 and currently there is no indication of increased cancers.”⁵ This response is confounding since the VA has been unable to provide any scientific or medical assessments or analysis that would support the VA’s repeated claim that there is not a causal relationship between hazardous exposures at K2 and developing cancer.

To the contrary, the one assessment the VA produced to the Committee—a publicly available Army Public Health Center study from 2015—found that veterans who served at K2 were more than five times as likely to be diagnosed with “malignant neoplasms of the lymphatic and hematopoietic tissues (leukemias and lymphomas)” than those who served in South Korea. While the authors of that report acknowledged that its findings were preliminary, they also wrote

<https://oversight.house.gov/legislation/hearings/karshi-khanabad-hazardous-exposures-and-effects-on-us-servicemembers>).

³ Committee on Oversight and Reform, Subcommittee on National Security, Testimony of Scott W. Welsch, *Karshi-Khanabad: Hazardous Exposures and Effects on U.S. Servicemembers* (Feb. 27, 2020) (online at <https://oversight.house.gov/legislation/hearings/karshi-khanabad-hazardous-exposures-and-effects-on-us-servicemembers>).

⁴ Committee on Oversight and Reform, Subcommittee on National Security, Testimony of Kim E. Brooks, *Karshi-Khanabad: Hazardous Exposures and Effects on U.S. Servicemembers* (Feb. 27, 2020) (online at <https://oversight.house.gov/legislation/hearings/karshi-khanabad-hazardous-exposures-and-effects-on-us-servicemembers>).

⁵ Letter from Secretary Robert L. Wilkie, Department of Veterans, to Chairwoman Carolyn B. Maloney, Committee on Oversight and Reform (Feb. 14, 2020).

that their results “may motivate further investigation.”⁶ Although the VA acknowledged that this matter “needs further review,” it has not provided any specific information about how or whether it would conduct such a review.⁷

Despite the VA’s claims that it obtained a complete roster of U.S. servicemembers who served at K2 from the Department of Defense (DOD) and that an “analysis is pending,” nowhere in the VA’s response does it suggest initiating outreach to these servicemembers and veterans to ensure their healthcare providers can make informed decisions about their treatment and care.⁸

During a February 5, 2020, speech at the National Press Club, you stated:

This is not your grandfather’s VA where the paperwork’s going to last 10 years, we’re computerizing, coming to the cloud, we have people ready to help, and that’s the message I give to K2. We are, like I said, aggressively working with DOD to get to the bottom of it, but in the meantime, we want people to come to us if they’ve been there.⁹

Your sentiments appear well-intentioned, but these men and women deserve answers from their government. Time is of the essence, as many of these veterans are battling advanced-stage cancers. We have also been made aware of at least one instance where a K2 veteran sought treatment from the VA after your February 5, 2020, remarks, but was told the VA could not conduct the requested depleted uranium and radiation testing.

For all of these reasons, we request that you contact the Committee by March 13, 2020, to schedule a briefing on how the VA is working internally, and with DOD, to “get to the bottom” of why so many veterans who previously deployed to K2 are now presenting with adverse health effects that have not been recognized by the VA as service-connected.

We also request that the VA produce by March 20, 2020, all previously requested documents and communications, including but not limited to communications with DOD, relating to U.S. servicemember deployments and potential for hazardous exposures at K2.

The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact Subcommittee staff at (202) 225-5051.

⁶ *Health Status of Personnel Formerly Deployed to Karshi-Khanabad (K2): A Comparative Assessment of Post-Deployment Medical Encounters*, Army Public Health Center (Oct. 2015) (online at www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/national/national-security/article238510218.html).

⁷ Letter from Secretary Robert L. Wilkie, Department of Veterans of Affairs, to Chairwoman Carolyn B. Maloney, Committee on Oversight and Reform (Feb. 14, 2020).

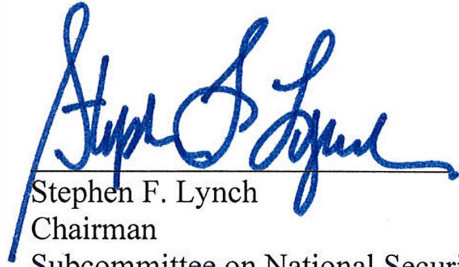
⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *NPC Newsmaker: Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie to Announce New Initiatives*, National Press Club (Feb. 5, 2020) (online at www.press.org/events/headliners/npc-newsmaker-veterans-affairs-secretary-robert-wilkie-announce-new-initiatives); ‘*Ready to Help: VA Asks Sick Veterans From Toxic ‘Black Goo’ Base to Come Forward*, McClatchy (Feb. 5, 2020) (online at www.mcclatchydc.com/article239990688.html).

Sincerely,



Carolyn B. Maloney
Chairwoman
Committee on Oversight and Reform



Stephen F. Lynch
Chairman
Subcommittee on National Security



Jody B. Hice
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on National Security



Mark Meadows
Member of Congress
Subcommittee on National Security



Mark Green
Member of Congress
Subcommittee on National Security