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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement
Subcommittee Chairman Stephen F. Lynch
Subcommittee on National Security
“Karshi-Khanabad: Honoring the Heroes of Camp Stronghold Freedom”
November 18, 2020 at 10:00 a.m.

Good morning, everyone. Last week, we celebrated Veterans Day to honor the brave men and women who have sworn to protect the United States throughout our nation’s history. Our country owes them all a solemn debt of gratitude.

Too often, however, when our sons and daughters in uniform have returned home with the scars of war, our government has failed them. From Agent Orange in Vietnam, to toxic exposures from burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan, our nation’s veterans have repeatedly sought acknowledgement of their injuries and assistance from Washington, only to be met with resistance, skepticism, and doubt.

This story is regrettably playing out, once again, for the soldiers, airmen, Marines, and National Guardsmen who deployed to Karshi-Khanabad, better known as K2, a former Soviet air base in Uzbekistan that U.S. forces used to support military operations in Afghanistan following the September 11th terrorist attacks.

Between 2001 and 2005, more than 15,000 men and women deployed to K2 to support Operation Enduring Freedom. [Declassified assessments](#) conducted by the military in the early 2000s, and released by our Subcommittee in July, show that servicemembers who deployed to K2 were exposed to multiple harmful toxins and environmental hazards leftover from their former Soviet occupants, including jet fuels and volatile organic compounds, depleted uranium, burn pits, particulate matter, and other cancer-causing chemicals.

Today, nearly two-decades later, the veterans and servicemembers who deployed to K2 have self-reported nearly 2,000 adverse health conditions, including 491 cancers, that they believe are connected to their prior service and exposures at K2.

And yet, despite clear evidence that servicemembers were exposed to dangerous hazards at K2, the VA inexplicably continues to deny that the life-altering illnesses reported by these veterans are service-connected—even after a 2015 Army Public Health Study found that K2 servicemembers were five times more likely to develop certain forms of cancer compared with others who deployed to South Korea. The VA’s continued denial has left hundreds, if not thousands, of K2 veterans ineligible for certain preventative health programs and unable to receive VA disability benefits in connection with their service at K2.

This is an injustice that must be rectified, and Secretary Wilkie has the authority to fix it by granting presumptive status to K2 veterans today. If we as a nation are willing to send our sons and daughters in uniform to war, then we must be prepared to care for them upon their return home.

Instead, DOD and the VA's responses to the concerns of K2 veterans and this Subcommittee have been inadequate. If not for our oversight, DOD likely would not have declassified hundreds of pages detailing the toxic hazards U.S. forces were exposed to at K2, and the VA would likely not have [committed](#) to launching a new epidemiological study. Even then, DOD withheld these [declassified documents](#) from our Committee for months, and the VA study is expected to take at least a year—all while K2 veterans are left waiting for answers.

While I appreciate the participation of Dr. Hastings and Dr. Smith, as well as their service to this country, I am disappointed that the VA declined to provide an assistant secretary-level policymaker—as we requested on a bipartisan basis—to testify alongside Dr. Hastings at today's hearing. Our K2 veterans and families have sacrificed enough on behalf of our nation, and many are still suffering. They deserve the highest levels of attention from both Departments. Sending an additional VA representative to testify alongside Dr. Hastings at today's hearing would have more fully demonstrated that commitment.

Before I yield the floor to Ranking Member Grothman, I would like to personally thank him and Ranking Member Comer for the bipartisanship you and your staffs have demonstrated throughout this investigation. **I would also like to thank Chairwoman Maloney for her unwavering support of our post-9/11 warriors, as well as the gentleman from Tennessee, Congressman Green, for his leadership on this issue and for co-sponsoring *H.R. 5957, the K2 Veterans Toxic Exposure Accountability Act of 2020*, with me earlier this year.**

With that, I will yield to the Ranking Member from the great state of Wisconsin, Mr. Grothman.

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