

Congress of the United States

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Opening Statement Chairman Stephen F. Lynch Subcommittee on National Security “Karshi-Khanabad: Hazardous Exposures and Effects on U.S. Servicemembers” February 27, 2020

It is now been nearly two decades since the United States came under attack on September 11, 2001. For all of us who remember that fateful day, the images of planes crashing into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania, will forever be seared in our memories.

It is also important to remember that in the weeks and months that followed, our Nation deployed tens of thousands of our active military, National Guard and Reserves, while tens of thousands of civilians stepped forward to enlist in the military or join the State Department and other government agencies to serve their country. In total, the United States deployed over a hundred thousand uniformed servicemembers to Afghanistan to take the fight to al Qaeda and the Taliban to defend our homeland and bring those responsible to justice.

Of particular note, to support our operations in Afghanistan, the United States established Camp Stronghold Freedom at Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan, also known as K2.

While K2 had been previously occupied by the Soviet Army during their incursions into Afghanistan in the 1980s, the base – which is about 100 miles from the Afghan border – became operationally and strategically critical to the U.S. mission in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2005. It is important to note, especially for the purposes of this hearing, that there is also evidence that K2 had been contaminated with various toxic chemicals and radiological hazards by its previous occupants, the Soviet Army.

Servicemembers who deployed to K2 reported seeing, quote, “pond water that glowed green” and “black goo oozing from the ground.” These hazards were reportedly caused by a prior explosion at a missile storage facility; abandoned fuel and other chemicals; and sources of depleted uranium.

Exposure to these hazards has reportedly led to cancer and other health problems among K2 veterans. To make matters worse, despite the evidence, and as numerous K2 veterans have come forward with various cancers—some in advanced stages—and other

related health problems to seek assistance and recognition, the VA has thus far repeatedly failed or refused to acknowledge their illnesses as service-connected.

Today, we will hear directly from some of these affected veterans and their families and about their difficulties in getting the VA to recognize their health conditions as related to their service at K2.

In January, Chairwoman Maloney and I requested information from the Department of Defense and the VA about K2. So far, the responses from both departments have been far below the standard that these veterans and their families deserve.

To date, DOD has yet to provide any of the documents we asked for, and instead told the Committee it would provide a more detailed response in three months. That's three months that K2 veterans, including those suffering from cancer, will be kept waiting for answers. In addition, the only document the VA produced to the Committee is a publicly available health assessment from the U.S. Army. While preliminary, even that report recognized there were statistically higher instances of cancer among K2 veterans and stated that its results, quote, "may motivate further investigation."

In addition, earlier this week, I was joined by my colleague from Tennessee, Representative Green to introduce a bill that would direct the Secretary of Defense to study toxic exposures among K2 servicemembers and direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a registry regarding those exposures. I thank the gentleman from Tennessee for his courageous service to our Nation and for working with me on this critically important issue.

I was fortunate to meet with two of our witnesses a few weeks ago when they came to Washington D.C. to advocate on behalf of those who had served at K2. Their stories were heart-wrenching but also reflect the patriotism and strength of the human spirit that exists in the hearts of our veterans and their families. They were stories of U.S. servicemembers who—after this nation was attacked—deployed bravely to K2 to support Operation Enduring Freedom. They were stories of men and women in uniform dedicated to their mission and of patriots committed to serving their country.

And yet, their stories and the stories of other veterans who served at K2 are also extremely troubling, too often because of how they end—with a life-changing diagnosis and unanswered questions from their government. Unfortunately, we have seen this pattern play out before. From Agent Orange in Vietnam, to military burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan, this is not the first time the VA has initially refused to acknowledge certain health conditions as related to military service, only to have that judgment overruled and a presumption of service-connected service established when additional information emerges.

To our witnesses, thank you for being here today to once again share your experiences. We want to get to the bottom of what you, your families, and your brothers and sisters in uniform have already experienced and continue to struggle with to this day.

One last thing before I close: To any veterans who served at K2, or their families, if you have concerns about your health, the care you have received, or want to share information with the Committee about your experiences at K2, please reach out to me and my staff at (202) 225-5051. I intend to continue to investigate this issue to ensure we fulfill this nation's promise to our servicemembers and their families.

I now yield to the Ranking Member, Mr. Hice of Georgia, for his opening statement.

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