

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 6, 2022

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

We write to express our ongoing concern about developments in Kazakhstan following the popular unrest that spread across the country in early January 2022 and to recommend steps to ensure proper accountability and encourage further political reforms, while also ensuring U.S. assistance is not implicated in abusive tactics and violence against civilians.

More than 200 people died during the events of January, which began as a genuine and widespread outcry against fuel price hikes, but turned violent after law enforcement forcibly dispersed peaceful protesters in Almaty on January 4. Although the Government of Kazakhstan has taken some positive steps over the past nine months, on balance the record remains lacking, with regards to investigation of the abuses by security forces, the deaths of protesters and bystanders, and the torture of detainees. Further, the Government of Kazakhstan has not effectively engaged with international NGOs, nor has it signaled support for invoking the Moscow Mechanism of the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) to allow for an expert mission to assist the investigation. Without international participation, we have serious doubts about the likelihood of an effective investigation into these events or that those responsible will be held to account.

For example, the Government of Kazakhstan has released little information about the individuals that died during the January events, such as a complete list of those who perished, their full names, and the circumstances of their deaths. Moreover, victims of torture have been similarly left in the dark about progress in investigating their abuse by Government of Kazakhstan forces. Since the outbreak of protests in early January 2022, prosecutors have registered 234 allegations of torture or abuse involving security officials,^[1] including eight deaths in custody.^[2] Despite widespread reports of torture, only fifteen officials are being investigated for these actions. There are no reports of security officers being questioned or detained over the 238 deaths and growing evidence of the authorities pressuring witnesses to the January events to withdraw accusations of abuse by security forces.^[3]

We are also deeply concerned by reports that KAZBAT security forces trained by the United States to participate in international peacekeeping missions were deployed during January, wearing UN peacekeeping helmets.^[4] In addition to ensuring that individuals and units implicated in human rights abuses do not receive U.S. assistance, the United States should fully investigate allegations about the misuse of U.S. security assistance or the UN insignia.

^[1] <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31728303.html>

^[2] <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31751832.html>

^[3] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/05/kazakhstan-no-justice-january-protest-victims>

^[4] <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-troops-un-helmets/31647393.html>

Given the gravity of these abuses, we believe that more must be done to ensure that effective and credible investigations into the killings and abuses are conducted, and to ensure that those responsible do not elude accountability. We respectfully request you take the following steps:

- Support an International Investigation: We urge you to take steps to establish an international investigation mechanism under the auspices of the United Nations Human Rights Council or the OSCE charged with investigating violations of international human rights law. The results of the investigation should be made public and oriented towards accountability for crimes and human rights abuses at the national and international level. We also ask that you work to ensure that such an investigation is adequately resourced and receives the cooperation of the Government of Kazakhstan, including access to the Government of Kazakhstan's investigation and case files necessary to mount an international investigation.
- Review U.S. Security Assistance: As the United States expands engagement with Kazakhstan and supports its reform agenda, and given reports of the involvement of U.S.-trained units in security efforts accompanied by widespread human rights abuses, it is imperative that we evaluate the effectiveness and use of U.S. security assistance. We also must assess the efficacy of Kazakhstan's ability to guarantee a proper investigation of human rights abuses, including those allegedly involving security forces, and capacity to prosecute those responsible for such abuses. We ask that you provide Congress with a detailed review of these critical matters and the steps you are taking to ensure that no U.S. assistance goes to police or military personnel implicated in human rights violations.

Given our deep and growing partnership with Kazakhstan, the United States has an obligation to assist the Kazakhstani government and people recover from the tragic events of January 2022. As the U.S. continues to expand its efforts and engagement in Central Asia – an effort that we support – we urge the Department of State to prioritize protecting fundamental freedoms and strengthening the rule of law. Achieving stability, economic prosperity, and public security in the region will not be possible without greater investment in good governance and strong democratic institutions, and accountability for abuses.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator