

## 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 that shares a border with northern Afghanistan. Over 15,000 U.S. service members were deployed to the U.S.-established 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 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.

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**The Solution**

- 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. Congress should enact legislation to grant K2 veterans eligibility to VA health care by expanding the definition of toxic exposures in title 38, United States Code, Section 1710.
- Congress by statute or the VA by regulation needs to recognize the toxic exposures at K2 and concede exposure to all of the identified toxins. This would remove barriers for direct service connection and allow K2 veterans to establish benefits without waiting for the VA and the scientific community to establish potential presumptive diseases.