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Oil workers rights threatened in Kazakhstan

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Max Bokayev from NGO Arlan in Kazkahstan has contributed this piece which discusses the violent clashes which took place between oil works and the authorities in late 2011. A recent Human Rights Watch report outlined how workers' rights are being abused in the Kazakh oil industry. Workers have been prevented from redressing these abuses, as companies have issued mass dismissals of those participating in peaceful protests and authorities have broken up peaceful strikes, leading to clashes.

In June 2012 the Aktau city court (in the Mangistau region of Kazakhstan), found thirteen Ozenmunaigaz company labor activists guilty of organizing and participating in the mass riots which took place in Zhanaozen in December 2011. The activists have been jailed for different terms going up to 6 years. (Ozenmunaigaz is affiliated with JSC Kazmunaigaz EP, an oil company listed on LSE.)

"Repressive laws and abusive practices by the government and some oil companies violate the labor rights of thousands of workers employed in Kazakhstan's booming petroleum sector" stated a Human Rights Watch report released in September 2012.

Accusations and convictions like the above are not rare in modern Kazakhstan. On October 8, 2012, the court found Vladimir Kozlov, the Kazakhstani opposition party leader, guilty of "inciting social discord", "calling for the forcible overthrow of constitutional order" and "creation of organized criminal gang". Vladimir Kozlov has been sentenced to seven and a half years - it should be noted that accusations brought against him hinged on the events in Zhanaozen. Kazakh civil society activist followed both trials and found that charges brought against the accused were absolutely groundless.

Numerous facts point to the fact that the Zhanaozen tragedy was not an accidental occurrence. The path to this tragedy was paved by bad governance, entrenched corruption and a lack of accountability and transparency. Both defendants and witnesses on the trials have repeatedly asserted that on December 16, 2011, fire first engulfed the Ozenmunaigaz accountants' office, before spreading to the rest of the building. The Zhanaozen oilers believed that arson was committed by managers whose aim was to eliminate documents that related to so called 'double entry.' Whether or not this is true could perhaps be confirmed by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development as the Ozenmunaigaz company submitted financial reports to the Bank since receiving from them a $100,000 loan. The Bank has distanced itself from the Zhanaozen events.

In such an environment it is very difficult to provide democracy and rule of law in Kazakhstan, to say nothing of implementing voluntary initiatives such as EITI. Nevertheless, it seems that there are some chances to avoid the widening rift between civil society and the authorities.

Kazakhstani civil society representatives are doing their best to prevent new "Zhanaozen" cases, though sometimes they feel alone in that battle.

More information

HRW press release

http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/09/10/kazakhstan-abusive-response-oil-worker-strikes

HRW report

http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/09/10/striking-oil-striking-workers-0

Statement by the spokesperson of High Representative Catherine

Ashton on the trial of Vladimir Kozlov in Kazakhstan

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/132776.pdf

documents on the loan

http://web.worldbank.org/external/projects/main?pagePK=51351038&piPK=51351152&theSitePK=40941&mnuPK=51351213&query=&fromDate=&qDate=4&IRISF=&fromDiscDate=&discDate=4&docTitle=&author=&aType=&owner=&origu=&colTitle=&displayOrder=DOCNA,DOCDT,REPNB,DOCTY&callBack=&siteName=PROJECTS&sType=&sport=&loan=&trustfund=&projid=P008507&credit=&sourceCitation=&projectId=P008507&startPoint=0&pageSize=10&sorting=DOCTY&dAtts=DOCTY,DOCNA,DOCDT,LANG,REPNB,VOLNB,REPNME&totalrecords=10

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