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Relatives Storm Kazakh Court as Riot Trial Begins

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Relatives Storm Kazakh Court as Riot Trial Begins **Vladimir Tretyakov**

AKTAU, Kazakhstan — Angry relatives of 37 people accused of playing a role in deadly oil town riots last year stormed a courtroom Tuesday where their relatives were due to go on trial.

The defendants are accused of participating in clashes that killed at least 14 people in the oil town of Zhanaozen last December, in the most serious challenge to President Nursultan Nazarbayev's more than two decades of rule.

Authorities say police were forced to open fire after being attacked by violent protesters, including sacked oil workers. Under scrutiny from the West and human rights bodies, they have pledged to hold a transparent investigation and fair trials.

Relatives of the accused said they were excluded from the open trial, held in the Caspian port city of Aktau, after being crammed into an anteroom near the makeshift court in a single-story youth center, hurriedly converted in the last few days.

“These people are innocent,” said Amantai Zhaumitbai, a 55-year-old ambulance driver among the dozens of relatives gathered outside the courtroom.

Judge Aralbai Nagashybayev adjourned the trial for several hours after one of two juveniles accused failed to appear at the court. Most of the relatives dispersed to the street outside, although some remained in the court to reserve scarce seats.

The defendants were brought into a glass cubicle hours later to cheers from family members.

The 37 accused face charges of organizing mass disorder, attacking police, robbery and arson during the violence in the remote and dusty town 145 kilometers from Aktau.

The riots erupted on the 20th anniversary of Kazakhstan’s independence from the Soviet Union and followed a months-long protest by local oil workers fired after going on strike in an attempt to win higher wages for their work on the salty steppe.

Many residents of Zhanaozen and Aktau say authorities were culpable for their failure to address the labor dispute by oil workers that began in May last year.

“Why are the Kazakh authorities sitting up there on high? Why did they let this happen?” said Zhaumitbai, whose brother, the breadwinner for a family of seven, is among those on trial.

“They went to defend their rights, but he was arrested along with the others,” he said, wearing a traditional embroidered felt hat. “Oil has been produced here for 50 years, and it has brought nothing good to the workers.”

Nazarbayev, a 71-year-old former steelworker, is genuinely popular across much of his country after presiding over sustained economic growth that has lifted Kazakh per capita gross domestic product to levels on par with Turkey and Mexico.

But critics point to a lack of democratic freedoms and say Nazarbayev is intolerant of dissent.

Amnesty International, in a report released last week, 100 days after the violence, said authorities had failed to conduct a satisfactory investigation into the use of force and firearms by security officers.

Around 200 people protested in Almaty on Saturday, holding signs bearing the names of the dead, to mark 100 days since the clashes.

Many residents of Zhanaozen were detained in the days after the violence. The town, where the burned-out shells of the local government and oil company headquarters have yet to be repaired, was under a state of emergency until the end of January.

“My son wasn’t even there, but he was arrested along with the others,” said a man in his 50s, who grabbed one of about 160 seats in the courtroom. He declined to give his name, fearing that this could jeopardize his son’s well-being.

The Prosecutor General’s Office has said police acted within their legal bounds during the Zhanaozen violence and used their weapons only after a “group of sacked oilmen and hooligan youths committed mass disorder.”

Prosecutors have also said a deputy regional police chief had been sued for dereliction of duty and that three other senior officers would stand trial separately for abuse of power.

In the anteroom, still smelling of fresh paint, a single water dispenser was provided for about 100 people. Those inside included residents of Zhanaozen seeking compensation for riot damage, who mingled freely with relatives of the accused.

Kamshat, a young woman who declined to give her second name, said her family had owned a nomad tent burned down by rioters during the Independence Day celebration, causing damage worth more than $20,000.

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