

Learning From Zhanaozen

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Thirty-seven individuals are now on trial in Kazakhstan's western city of Aktau charged with organizing and participating in violent disturbances that left 14 people dead and scores injured in the oil town of Zhanaozen in December. These tragic events were sparked by a long-standing dispute between oil company Ozenmunaigaz in Zhanaozen and some of its former workers.

Six Kazakh officials from the Interior Ministry are also facing criminal charges for exceeding their authority, and two former mayors of Zhanaozen and a first deputy regional head have been arrested and charged with misappropriating state money intended for the social welfare of the town's population.

Kazakhstan's Prosecutor General's Office has conducted an exhaustive investigation into the Zhanaozen events. We established that the disturbances were caused by a group of former oil workers aided by a number of young people who disrupted the Dec. 16 celebrations of Kazakhstan's 20 years of independence by attacking police officers and innocent bystanders, as well as vandalizing, looting and setting fire to 125 facilities in the town.

This shocking violence was unprecedented in Kazakhstan and has its roots in social tensions that were inadequately managed at the local level. Regrettably, corruption on the part of some Zhanaozen officials exacerbated the problem. While as a government we have to be open about the causes of these tragic events and take measures to prevent them from happening again, we also have a responsibility to deal swiftly, firmly and fairly with the perpetrators. No civilized country can tolerate behavior of this kind.

This is exactly what we are doing, and we have also taken an extra step by making the trials open. It is important that the citizens of Kazakhstan and our international partners are able to see that justice is being done.

A number of human rights organizations have claimed that some of the 37 charged with instigating the disturbances in Zhanaozen gave evidence under duress and cannot receive a fair trial as a result. These are serious allegations, and we will investigate them if they can be substantiated.

Our investigation also identified important failures in some of the police responses to the disturbances. While police actions were for the most part appropriate and in line with operating procedures, there were instances when the use of weapons and other special equipment was disproportionate and inappropriate to the level of threat they faced. This is why a number of law enforcement officials will stand trial for their actions. Our message is clear: No one stands above the law.

Kazakhstan has much to learn from these events and our handling of them. We are studying the experience of the United States, France and Britain to see how they dealt with similar outbreaks of violence. The Los Angeles Police Department, for example, applied important lessons from the civil unrest of 1992, including new forms of community policing and partnerships with civic organizations.

After last summer's riots in several British cities, courts in Britain worked overtime to hear the cases against rioters and looters and handed down tough sentences to convicted offenders, in some cases going well beyond the usual sentencing guidelines.

In these situations, firm action is needed to protect society and to keep society's confidence in the state's commitment to uphold public order. Individuals convicted of offenses related to the Zhanaozen disturbances can also expect the full force of the law to be applied against them.

In today's world, news travels faster than ever before but often not accurately. Some early media reports from Zhanaozen put the death toll much higher than it was, and one Russian newspaper falsely reported the testimony of a surgeon at Zhanaozen's central hospital, who claimed to have seen the bodies of 23 victims of the violence. Investigations revealed that this person did not exist.

However difficult as it may be in these crisis situations, journalists have the same responsibility to check their sources and report the facts. At the same time, governments in democratic countries have to maintain a difficult balance between protecting society and ensuring the rights of the media to report these events.

Kazakhstan is learning the painful lessons of Zhanaozen to avoid situations of this kind in future. Bringing the people responsible for the violence to justice and ensuring they receive a fair trial is a vital step in this process.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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