

Kazakhstan Tells Britain Not to Lecture Them on Human Rights

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Nazarbayev, left, greeting Cameron with flowers at the airport on Sunday. **Leon Neal**

ASTANA — Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev said Monday that nobody had the right to lecture his country, after British Prime Minister David Cameron raised concerns about human rights in the former Soviet state.

In Kazakhstan on a brief visit that saw 700 million pounds (\$1.06 billion) of business deals, Cameron, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with Nazarbayev, said he had discussed "at length" allegations about government repression.

Nazarbayev was stone-faced, underscoring the political risks of Cameron's strategy of broadening Britain's trade links to include emerging economies such as Kazakhstan, which sits on a wealth of oil reserves.

Cameron says Britain needs to diversify such links at a time when its economy is in the doldrums. But activists have accused him of putting trade before human rights, while the countries he is trying to court bridle at criticism of their rights records.

"I discussed for instance the letter written by Human Rights Watch, and the concerns in that letter," Cameron told a news conference in the Kazakh leader's presidential palace.

"It's very important we have a frank dialogue."

In the letter, which was sent on Friday, New York-based Human Rights Watch said it was worried about credible allegations of torture, the imprisonment of government critics, and tight controls over the media and freedom of expression. It urged Cameron to raise the subject with the Kazakh president.

Nazarbayev, a former Communist party apparatchik who has ruled Kazakhstan for more than 20 years, responded coldly.

"Thank you very much for the recommendations, for the advice, but nobody has a right to instruct us how to live," said Nazarbayev, who turns 73 this week and enjoys the official title of "The Leader of the Nation."

While activists say the rest of Central Asia has much harsher autocratic leaders than Nazarbayev, they say his refusal to tolerate opposition or dissent shows few signs of easing.

In particular, they say they are concerned about the case of Vladimir Kozlov, a jailed opposition leader.

An outspoken critic of Nazarbayev, Kozlov was jailed for 7 1/2 years in October for colluding with a fugitive billionaire in a failed attempt to rally oil workers to bring down the government. Kozlov denied the charges.

Nazarbayev, who was a member of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's last Politburo of the Communist party, said Westerners often viewed his country through a distorted prism.

"People from your island see the post-Soviet space as being in the middle ages, where residents ride camels and horses."

Kazakhstan needed time to develop democracy, he added.

"British parliamentary democracy is 600 years old. It won't take us that long, of course. Democracy for us is not the beginning of the journey but the end of the journey. We're moving forward."

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