

Police massacre striking oil workers in Kazakhstan

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A public commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of Kazakhstan independence on Friday in the town of Zhanaozen, located in Mangystau Province just 60 kilometers from the shore of the Caspian Sea, turned into a violent police attack on striking oil workers. Government officials reported the deaths of 13 workers, but other sources claim over 70 people were killed and as many as 800 wounded.

Human rights organizations, Kazakhstan opposition groups and sources outside Kazakhstan report that security forces opened fire on the striking workers. Because of current restrictions on communications with the city, little verifiable information is available, but even officials acknowledge that hospitals in Zhanaozen are overflowing and the wounded are being evacuated to other cities. They also report 70 arrests, including three journalists from leading Russian news web sites.

In Mangystau Province, Kazakhstan's principal oil-producing region, oil workers have been on strike since May in both Zhanaozen (at UzenMunayGas, a subsidiary of the Kazakhstan state-owned KazMunayGas) and Aktau (at KarazhanbasMunai, jointly owned by KazMunayGas and the Chinese state-owned CITIC Group). They are demanding that the companies comply with agreements to raise the workers' wages.

Last January, workers at KarazhanbasMunai attempted to replace trade union leader Yerbosyn Kosarkhanov, who had been collaborating with the employer by agreeing to wage concessions behind the backs of the union membership. The company responded by sending hired thugs to beat several workers. Police have refused to investigate the incident.

In April, workers successfully voted out Kosarkhanov, but the company refused to hand over official documents and the trade union seal (necessary for official recognition of the union) to the union's new leadership. Although this effectively constitutes theft, police have refused to investigate this issue as well.

The strike began in May at KarazhanbasMunai in Aktau. It soon spread to UzenMunayGas in Zhanaozen.

Since June, as many as 18,000 workers have been on strike, with up to 8,000 demonstrating in Zhanaozen on peak days. Local authorities have declared the strike illegal. The companies have fired hundreds of striking workers in violation of labor law.

The union's lawyer, Nataliya Sokolova, has been serving a six-year prison sentence since August for the crime of "inciting a social conflict" for organizing workers without an official permit. Workers have added the freeing of Sokolova to their list of

demands.

A peaceful demonstration of oil workers in Aktau in June ended with hundreds of arrests and a number of beatings by police.

Striking workers have reported continuing acts of intimidation since June. These are systematically blacked out of the Kazakhstan media, but are available through web sites outside of Kazakhstan. Local reporters also indicate a concerted smear campaign by government institutions against striking workers and periodic shutdowns of Internet and cellular phone services in Zhanaozen.

In early August, hired thugs murdered trade union activist Zhaksylyk Turbayev at his workplace. Three weeks later, the body of the 18-year-old daughter of Kurdaibergen Karabalyev, another activist, was found dead outside the city. Friends and family blame the company.

The disorder on Friday apparently began when dozens of men dressed as oil workers wrecked audio equipment on a stage that had been set up in Yntymak Square in the city center for the Independence Day events. A video of these events quickly appeared on YouTube, while a second video appeared somewhat later.

Neither video shows any of the mass unrest apart from relatively isolated acts of property destruction in the square. According to human rights activist Alexander Mukha, the riot began when somebody threw a package of explosives into the crowd.

Kazakhstan Prosecutor General Askhat Daulbayev rushed to blame the violence on the "hooligans" seen in the video, whom he describes as laid-off oil workers, accusing them of beating passersby, wrecking parked cars, burglarizing stores, apartment buildings, banks, pawn shops and ATM machines, and burning a police bus, an UzenMunayGas building, the building of the city's administration, and the Aru-Ana Hotel.

On Saturday, hundreds of civilians at Shetpe Station outside Zhanaozen blocked railway lines in protest over the police violence of the previous day. Official sources report that the protesters blocking a train began pelting it with Molotov cocktails, "compelling" police to open fire on them.

One protester was killed, and eleven others were wounded. Also on Saturday, a second demonstration in which participants carried white flags with the word "peace" was held in Zhanaozen. A Reuter's correspondent witnessed another protest demonstration of about 500 people in Aktau on that day.

Internet and cellular phone communications with Zhanaozen have been cut off, blocking access to journalists and anyone else

wishing to investigate the bloody events. As of Sunday, land telephone lines were only sporadically operational.

Journalists calling hospitals in Zhanaozen to clarify the number of victims have been denied information. Meanwhile, 1,500 marines with armored personnel carriers have descended on Zhanaozen. The roads to the city have been blocked off. Kazakhstan opposition politicians claim their web sites have been shut down.

On Saturday, Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev issued a decree declaring a state of emergency and a curfew in Zhanaozen to last through January 5. The decree establishes a ban on strikes and public protests, restricts freedom of movement within the city, and limits access to and from the city.

In his announcement, Nazarbayev acknowledged that the civil unrest that has been occurring in many countries is largely a result of the global recession. But he insisted that the oil workers are already well-paid, that Friday's events were "alien to our country," and that the "hooligans" responsible for the disorder will be held accountable.

He said "real" oil workers (i.e., scabs) should not be blamed for the events. The government, he promised, has organized a special commission to "investigate" the events.

Nazarbayev is the longest-ruling despot of all the nations formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. For twenty years he has maneuvered between the United States and Russia, basing himself on the oil wealth of Kazakhstan and the strategic location of his state. His moves against the oil workers are consistent with his slavish cultivation of links to major oil companies both at home and abroad.

One of Nazarbayev's advisers, Yermukhamet Yertysbayev, suggested in an interview with *TengriNews* that the "hooligans" (sometimes referred to as "bandits") were well organized and possibly financed by "external forces." Many commentators, however, have suggested that the "hooligans" were provocateurs working for the oil companies and/or the government. There are a number of reasons why this is plausible.

First, there is little historical precedent for striking workers attacking police without provocation, but there is a long history of police initiating attacks on striking workers. In such situations, it is standard procedure for the abusers to blame the victims, with the full support of the central authorities and the mass media.

Everything about Friday's events is entirely consistent with the typical scenario of a mass demonstration violently repressed by the police and accompanied by a systematic disinformation campaign on behalf of the state. The year 2011 has witnessed events following this scenario around the world, from Bahrain to California. In general, an official explanation for acts of state violence against a civilian population that blames mysterious bands of "hooligans" and "bandits" deserves to be taken with a large grain of salt.

In addition, striking workers in Mangystau Province have had their basic rights denied with the connivance of the police for months. They have every reason to fear police provocation, while the workers' enemies have much to gain (at least in the short-term) from a brutal police crackdown that could be justified by such a provocation.

The response of the president and prosecutor general was exceptionally fast. One commentator noted that the Kazakhstan government's response to previous clashes with police had been much slower and less vigorous. There is also the fact that the two carefully edited videos of the initial acts of "hooliganism" in the city square have been widely circulated, as have photos of the aftermath of burnt buildings and cars, but video footage or photographs of police shooting at the oil workers have yet to appear. Finally, some striking workers reported receiving threatening text messages on their cell phones prior to Friday's events.

The ongoing blockage of communications indicates that a cover-up is under way, and possibly further acts of repression. If, as the Kazakhstan government now claims, the situation was brought under control by Saturday, why are communications still cut off as of Sunday? Why must the state of emergency, including restrictions on ingress and egress from the city, continue for eighteen more days?

Ironically, Friday's events coincided not only with the twentieth anniversary of Kazakhstan independence, but with the twenty-fifth anniversary of Zheltoksan, a popular uprising in Alma-Ata in 1986 that anti-communists of various stripes portray as the harbinger of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism. The scale of the repression during that uprising remains an object of controversy, as archival materials on the events are still held secret.

It is entirely possible that the number of victims of the Zhanaozen massacre of 2011 exceeds the number of victims of post-Zheltoksan repression. In any case, the fact that the deprivations experienced by much of the Kazakhstan population over the past twenty years have been routinely justified through invocation of the repressions of December 1986 will not be lost upon the people of Kazakhstan as they reflect upon the shooting of oil workers in December 2011.



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