

Kazakhstan: Eleven workers, one officer sentenced following police massacre

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A court has sentenced 11 workers in Kazakhstan, following a ferocious police intervention December 16 that ended with the deaths of 16 striking oil workers and hundreds wounded in the city of Zhanaozen. The police massacre was a response by the government to a month-long strike by thousands of oil workers in the Kazakh city.

The trial of 12 oil workers lasted around two months and took place in a highly charged atmosphere. (See "Workers put on trial after police massacre in Kazakhstan") Some of the workers were charged with participating in mass unrest and the use of force against government representatives, while others were accused of "inciting social discord."

Four of the 11 workers sentenced were given prison sentences of between four and seven years; six others were sentenced to two years in prison, but were then released. One person was sentenced to probation and one defendant was acquitted. The 11 convicted workers are from the city of Schetpe, scene of protest rallies following the police massacre. One worker was killed during the Schetpe protests.

The relatively mild sentences for the workers reflect fears on the part of the government headed by President Nursultan Nazarbayev that there could be further protests and strikes in support of those condemned. Thirty-seven workers and activists from Zhanaozen are still awaiting a verdict.

According to reports from defendants and relatives, police systematically tortured the accused to extract confessions. One defendant was tortured to death by police. Tamara Erasewa, the wife of one of the accused, publicly declared that witnesses had been coerced into testifying against her husband who has now been sentenced to two years with probation.

On May 17, police officer Schenisbek Temirov was sentenced for the death of one of the accused held in custody. Another five police officers are due to be tried on charges related to "abuse of their powers". They are accused of shooting fleeing demonstrators. Besides these six defendants, no other policemen have been brought to justice for the deliberate murder of the 16 striking workers last December.

The court cases against the oil workers and the police are widely regarded as an attempt to find scapegoats for the massacre and subsequent systematic torture of defendants apparently organised by the government.

Arman Schuchaev, the brother of one man murdered in Zhanaozen, told a Kazakh newspaper, "They tell us nothing, we get no information about the investigation and were not invited to the trial, although in my opinion they were obliged to do so. Probably they agree on everything together in advance."

According to reports from local residents, five buses full of soldiers, two military columns and a large contingent of police patrolled the city of Zhanaozen on the day the sentences were announced. The huge turnout of state security forces reflected official fears of an escalation of tensions.

The government in Astana remains concerned that fresh protests against the massacre of workers and the trials still to be held could be directed against the government. Social relations in Kazakhstan are very tense and there have been a series of new strikes and protests by workers.

The strike by oil workers in Zhanaozen lasted around seven months and had the support of broad sections of society. The workers began the strike in a bid to receive payment of their wages. Their employer, the oil company Ozenmunaigaz, had paid them only half their agreed salary. In the course of the strike the workers

raised additional political demands and demanded the resignation of the president.

There have been repeated strikes in the country's oil and coal industries since the start of the economic crisis, which has hit Kazakhstan hard. Workers have protested against the non-payment of wages, poor working conditions and inadequate food supply. There have been increasing demands for the nationalization of the country's private businesses.

The Kazakh online newspaper, tengrinews.kz, reported recently that the rich elite in Kazakhstan earn nearly 30 times as much as the rest of the population. The average monthly salary of a worker is \$US103-517, while 34 percent of the population earns less than \$310 a month. The official inflation rate stands at 8.3 percent.

According to the National Bank, 50 percent of all the country's bank deposits are concentrated in the hands of 0.1 percent of the population. The business magazine *Forbes* writes that the rich elite in Kazakhstan controls a total fortune of \$24 billion. Most of this elite comes from the immediate political entourage and family around President Nazarbayev. In 1989, Nazarbayev was first secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party. He was one of the leading figures in the restoration of capitalism, becoming national president in 1990.



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