



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

May 4, 2020

The Honorable Elaine Luria
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance
and Memorial Affairs
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Luria:

Thank you for your March 11, 2020, letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs concerning recent reports of Servicemembers' exposure to hazardous materials while serving at the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base (K-2) in Uzbekistan during the early years of the Global War on Terrorism. I appreciate the opportunity to address your concerns. Responses to the questions enumerated in your letter are enclosed. I trust this information is helpful to you.

Should you have further questions, please have a member of your staff contact Ms. Jennifer Janowski, Congressional Relations Officer, at (202) 461-0621 or by email at Jennifer.Janowski@va.gov.

Thank you for your continued support of our mission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert L. Wilkie".

Robert L. Wilkie

Enclosure

**Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Response to Chairwoman Luria
Regarding Hazardous Materials at K-2**

Question 1: Without disclosing personally identifiable information, how many veterans seeking treatment with VA have a history of deployment to K-2?

VA Response: VA is working with the Department of Defense (DoD) to accurately define the K-2 cohort/population and review the work done by DoD on site evaluations. DoD provided VA with a preliminary list of social security numbers of deployed individuals, but the number of cases exceeds the total population initially studied by DoD. Conducting analyses without identifying the correct population risks drawing erroneous conclusions regarding the effects of service at K-2 by underestimating the effects of exposure thus diluting estimates of risk.

Question 1a: Please provide a list of injuries or illnesses for which K-2 veterans have sought VA treatment.

VA Response: This question can be answered accurately after confirmation of the authoritative K-2 list.

Question 1b: Please provide the number of K-2 veterans seeking treatment for each injury or illness.

VA Response: This question can be answered accurately after confirmation of the authoritative K-2 list.

Question 2: How many K-2 veterans who either enrolled in VA health care or applied for VA disability benefits subsequently died? Please provide causes of death if known.

VA Response: On March 25, 2020, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) identified 11 K-2 Veterans who applied for disability benefits. As of this date, VA has not been notified that any of these Veterans has died.

Question 3: How many disability claims has VA received from K-2 veterans?

VA Response: VBA's available data show that 11 disability claims were filed. Please know that VBA does not currently track claims from K-2 Veterans. VBA was able to derive data by performing a text search within decisions for the terms "Uzbekistan," "Karshi-Khanabad," and/or "K-2."

Question 3a: Please provide a list of injuries or illnesses claimed.

VA Response: The following injuries or illnesses were claimed from K-2 Veterans:

- Posttraumatic stress disorder (also claimed as memory loss and anxiety);
- Headaches;
- Dizziness;

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- Chronic joint pain;
- Undiagnosed disabilities (headaches, cough, and chest congestion);
- Rectal bleeding;
- Irritable bowel syndrome;
- Cyst removal on left brow/temple with pre-cancerous growths;
- Skin rash, left eye;
- Hypertension;
- Acute bronchitis; and
- Acute sinusitis.

Question 3b: Please indicate the number of granted or denied claims.

VA Response: There were 11 K-2 Veterans that filed disability claims. Of these Veterans, they filed 13 disability issues. Based on the number of disability issues, there was 1 grant and 12 denials.

Question 4: How does VA decide whether to create a presumption of service connection for an injury or an illness?

VA Response: Presumptive determinations may be required by statute or regulation and are generally based on scientific evidence of an association between a toxic exposure of adequate dose and duration to cause harm and a defined health condition. A presumption typically operates to satisfy, by operation of law, the requirement that the claimant establish a link between service and the claimed condition. For some presumptive conditions, VA is required by law to review reports from the National Academy of Sciences.

Question 5: Has VA conducted any studies, evaluations, or assessments on the relationship between deployment to K-2 and any diagnosis? If so, what were the results?

VA Response: While the K-2 roster is being finalized, VA continues to design and plan for a follow-up K-2 population study. This follow-up extends the original study by including the following: (1) a longer follow-up period (15-19 years); (2) a broader range of health outcomes, not just cancers; (3) mortality data for all causes of death; (4) comparisons with Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom not deployed to K-2; and (5) a comparison of mortality results to that of the general population. This is a more comprehensive assessment that we hope will provide more definitive scientific evidence for or against K-2-related exposure and adverse health outcomes.

Question 6: On average, how many medical opinions did VA request when a veteran who deployed to K-2 filed a claim for VA disability benefits? What were

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the degrees, practice areas, and specialties of the medical personnel providing these medical opinions?

VA Response: Based on the available data, VBA requested medical opinions in almost half of these cases. The medical personnel that performed the examinations were clinicians from the Veterans Health Administration who are clinical psychologists, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants.

Question 7: All documents and communications, including but not limited to, communications between VA and DOD, relating to U.S. servicemember deployments to K-2 and the potential for exposure to hazardous materials at K-2.

VA Response: When VA receives additional information from DoD, we can provide a more complete response.

Department of Veterans Affairs
April 2020