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United States Senate

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February 16, 2021

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write to request your cooperation in finding answers and ensuring proper care for veterans who were exposed to toxic substances at Camp Stronghold Freedom at Karshi-Khanabad Airbase (K2) in Uzbekistan at the start of Operation Enduring Freedom. K2 was a former Soviet military base used by the U.S. military to launch operations into Afghanistan during the critical early years of the Global War on Terrorism. In the years since their deployments, veterans who served at K2 have encountered disturbingly high rates of rare cancers and other negative health consequences. Because of recent legislative enactments, this issue requires the attention of the Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Defense (DOD), as well as the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Your leadership is crucial to ensure effective coordination and implementation of laws designed to help these veterans in need.

During the 116th Congress, the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs (SVAC) worked hard to address the needs of K2 veterans who are experiencing negative health outcomes due to toxic exposure. Specifically, in the *Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act*, now Public Law 116-315, Congress mandated that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs enter into an agreement with the CDC's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) to complete a study that will analyze the incidence of cancer within the K2 cohort, all the toxic substances and hazards they may have encountered at K2, and any associated health consequences. Furthermore, this legislation directs the inclusion of Uzbekistan in the list of deployment locations eligible for the VA's Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry and ensures that all K2 veterans are covered by the Joint DOD/VA Depleted Uranium Follow-up Program.

In addition, the fiscal year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (Public Law 116-283) contains provisions relating to veterans who served at K2. Specifically, section 751 directs the Secretary of Defense to conduct a study on exposure to toxic substances by those deployed to K2, including identification of all substances present, an epidemiological study of the health outcomes of the K2 cohort, and any association between identified exposures and observed health outcomes.

These laws, coupled with Executive Order No. 13892 signed on January 19, 2021¹, which mandates a detailed assessment by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, in consultation with the Secretary of Defense, of the conditions at K2 between October 1, 2001, and December 31, 2005, including identification of any toxic substances contaminating K2 during such period, shows the commitment across our government to take care of the veterans who served at K2. Each agency's role in this research is crucial; plans to initiate studies and coordination across federal agencies need to start immediately. Because these efforts all seek to address different aspects of the same problem, the VA, DOD, and CDC must work together to make certain that their

¹ Exec. Order No. 13892, 86 Fed. Reg. 6833 (January 19, 2021)

work is complementary to one another and adds value to the overall effort. As the foremost senior government official tasked with caring for veterans we will rely on you to be responsible for this coordination.

With regard to the administration of these laws, we urge you to provide periodic public updates and conduct regular outreach directly to K2 veterans who have filed claims. Keeping K2 veterans, their families, and their survivors fully informed is imperative throughout this process and going forward as we learn more about K2 veterans' health challenges and associated care needs. We also request that you, or your designee, coordinate and provide briefings to Committee staff, on a monthly basis, that will include representatives from VA, DOD, and ATSDR to outline the progress of the implementation of laws relating to K2 veterans. This collaboration will ensure that both branches remain aligned and informed while creating and executing crucial public policy efforts.

There is no group of people that we hold in higher regard than those who served in uniform. We look forward to working together with you and the Department to make certain that all who served at K2, as well as their families and survivors, have the care and answers that they deserve.

Sincerely,



Jerry Moran
Ranking Member



Dan Sullivan
U.S. Senator



Marsha Blackburn
U.S. Senator



Thom Tillis
U.S. Senator