

Kazakh Oil Consortium Accused of “Mass Poisoning” of Village School Children

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The village of Berezovka, Kazakhstan. Photo: Sanat Urnaliyev. Used under Creative Commons license

A Kazakh oil consortium has been accused of “mass poisoning” after 25 school children and four teachers passed out almost simultaneously at a school in Berezovka village in northwest Kazakhstan. The incident is the latest in a decade of allegations of pollution caused by the neighboring Karachaganak oil field.

Karachaganak Petroleum Operating B.V. ([KPO](#)) is a [joint venture among multiple stakeholders](#) that were awarded the exclusive rights to extract oil from the Karachaganak reserves in 1997. BG Group of the UK and ENI of Italy each hold 29.25 percent while Chevron from the U.S., Lukoil from Russia and nationally owned KuzMunaiGas hold smaller stakes.

“The emergency situation which arose on November 28 is not surprising. [This is a direct result of omissions by the public authorities, and violations by KPO of the requirements for environmental and industrial safety](#),” said Sergey Solyanik, a lawyer with Crude Accountability, a U.S. based NGO.

“All of this has led to human rights violations, as well as the fact that the villagers are subjected to discrimination based on their place of residence, social status and economic situation. The residents of Berezovka and their children are hostages of the Karachaganak oil field.”

The Karachaganak oil field covers over 280 square kilometers on the eastern border of Russia extending down to the Caspian Sea. The [field reserves contain 1.2 billion tons of oil condensate and 1.35 trillion cubic meters of gas](#).

In 2002, the [International Finance Corporation, the private sector arm of the World Bank, provided a \\$150 million loan to Lukoil to help develop the field](#). In late 2003, Karachaganak started to produce oil and now the oil fields have become a mainstay of the Kazakh economy. [In 2013, a quarter of the gross domestic product was derived from oil revenues](#).

But ever since the first oil was produced, the [villagers of Berezovka have complained about the pollution](#). A 2003 study found that [45 percent of Berezovka villagers suffered from chronic illness while another study conducted the same year showed 25 toxic compounds including carbon disulfide, hydrogen sulfide and methylene chloride](#). A 2004 study by Zhasil Dala (Green Steppe), another Kazakh NGO, found heavy metals in vegetables grown in

Berezovka with cadmium levels 2 to 2.5 times higher than average.

The following year Crude Accountability made a short film – [Five Kilometers of Indifference](#) – with the help of the local organizations that had conducted independent health studies of villagers in late 2004.

Also in 2004, Crude Accountability and the Green Salvation Ecological Society in Kazakhstan [filed a complaint with the Compliance Advisor/Ombudsman \(CAO\) of the World Bank for environmental violations](#), followed by two more complaints in 2007 and 2008. The CAO upheld part of the complaint in 2008, relating to air pollution.

On November 28, 2014, 29 children between the ages of 10 and 15 and four teachers fainted at the Berezovka village school.

“We are not talking about any one classroom. [“Children from different classrooms located at different floors fainted,”](#) Azamat Safimaliye, the district vice governor, told Tengrinews.

The villagers immediately blamed the oil field. “There are so many flares that we don’t need streetlights during the night. There has been a strong smell lately, and there were loud pops at the field a couple of days ago. But whatever we say, no one wants to listen to us,” Aleksey Koba, the father of a seventh grader at the school, told Tengrinews.

Manshuk Aimurzieva, the deputy head of the regional healthcare department, later confirmed that an “unidentified toxic substance had a selective effect on the central nervous system” of the children admitted to the hospital.

KPO immediately issued a statement expressing concern for villagers’ safety but refused to accept any liability.

“We have special ecological control posts set all around the field. Their measurements are very precise and they’re all functioning,” Steve Wright, the health, safety, environmental and quality controller for KPO, said in a statement.

On December 11, more than half of the citizens of Berezovka, signed a petition to the President and Prime-Minister of Kazakhstan asking to be relocated from the village. [“What happened was the last straw of the villagers’ patience,”](#) Solyanik of Crude Accountability, told the media. “The appeal was signed by 951 villagers out of the total of 1,580 people who live here. That is, more than a half of the residents are asking to be relocated.”

On December 15, Berdybek Saparbayev, the [deputy Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, visited the village and announced that a state investigation would take place](#), with results to be announced in late January.

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