

Conflict in the Soviet Union:

The Untold Story of the Clashes in Kazakhstan

October 1990

A Helsinki Watch Report

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Introduction

In December 1986, Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan, saw the first major expression of popular anger since Mikhail Gorbachev had come to power. A crowd of thousands of youths, mostly Kazakhs, took to the streets to protest the appointment of Gennadi Kolbin as First Party Secretary of Kazakhstan. In the violence that followed, at least three people were killed by government forces and hundreds wounded. Hundreds were detained; 99 were later charged and sentenced.

Although the Soviet government, in line with its new policy of *glasnost*, admitted that there had been riots, it immediately closed Alma-Ata to foreign journalists. Official Soviet press reports stressed that the "December events" were due to young Kazakh nationalists, whose extremist views were heightened by drugs and vodka.

For two months after the December disturbances, Alma-Ata was off-limits to the world. By the time Western reporters were allowed to go there, most participants had already been locked up. Local efforts to discover the real course of events in December 1986 -- on both the official and the unofficial levels -- received little publicity.

In view of the lack of reliable information on the Alma-Ata disorders of December 1986 -- and the increasing frequency of similar instances in the USSR -- Helsinki Watch decided to conduct its own fact-finding investigation in Kazakhstan. In late May 1990, two Helsinki Watch staff members, Executive Director Jeri Laber and Washington Representative Catherine Cosman, visited Alma-Ata and Karaganda to talk with local people about the "December events."

In Alma-Ata, people are still eager to find out what really happened in their city in December 1986. They are also willing to talk to foreigners, even on politically sensitive subjects. By now, almost all of the "December" prisoners have been released, and Helsinki Watch was able to interview some of them.

The people interviewed held various, sometimes conflicting, views on the nature of the "December events." In fact, the cause of the disturbances has been the subject of much debate. It is likely to remain unclear whether the protest was directed primarily at Kremlin policies or whether it was a clash between Kazakhs and Russians or among competing Kazakh clans. Most people in Kazakhstan reject the label of Kazakh nationalism -- implying Kazakh versus Russian -- which the Central Committee in Moscow pinned on the events in July 1987. On May 21, 1990, while Helsinki Watch was in Kazakhstan, the Central Committee formally repealed this designation -- much to the satisfaction of Kazakhstan activists.

The authors of this report, in attempting to document the events of December 1986, were handicapped by continuing secrecy. Even the official parliamentary group charged with investigating the events (the "Shakhanov Commission") has twice been prevented from publishing its findings on the Alma-Ata disorders and has been denied access to official archives on casualties, although the Helsinki Watch mission was told that access has been promised. (Three English-language translations of documents on the "December events" and on or by the Shakhanov Commission are attached to this report.)

This report is based primarily on a wide variety of interviews conducted in Kazakhstan by Helsinki Watch in May of this year. In addition to interviews with officials and ordinary citizens of several nationalities in Alma-Ata and Karaganda, Helsinki Watch conducted twelve in-depth interviews with people closely involved in the "December events." Of those in-depth interviews, nine were Kazakhs, three were members of other nationalities; nine were men, three were women; nine were

eyewitnesses, three were told of events by eyewitnesses; eight were employed in various professions, two were workers, and two had unknown employment backgrounds.

The tragic events of December 1986 have served as a major impetus for the formation of various citizens' groups in Kazakhstan which grew up in the late 1980s. One of these groups, "Zholtoksan," comprised largely of former "December" prisoners, has the specific goal of investigating the Alma-Ata disorders. A coalition of twelve citizens' groups signed a collective protest in December 1989 about the dearth of public information on the "December events." It names Soviet and Kazakhstan officials it considers responsible for mishandling demonstrators and covering up information, calling for dismissals. (This protest, in English translation, is also attached to this report.)

In addition to a citizens' investigatory group, several parliamentary commissions -- centered around Peoples' Deputy Mukhtar Shakhnov -- have been formed to examine the "December events." These commissions, however, have encountered significant opposition and even obstruction from the Kazakhstan establishment. Nevertheless, the "Shakhnov Commission" did send to the West a samizdat version of its initial findings. (An English language translation of this report is appended.)

The Soviet government continues to deny journalists and Westerners timely access to areas of unrest in the Soviet Union. Such obsessive secrecy leads to widespread rumormongering in Soviet society. There are some signs of improvement, however; whereas initial Soviet press reports on the "December events" were timid and stereotyped, more recent Soviet press reports on subsequent disorders in Kazakhstan have become more detailed, neutral in tone, and informative.

Helsinki Watch hopes that the Soviet government will follow the logic of its own glasnost policy by allowing the world press unhindered access to areas of civil unrest. Opening remote corners of Soviet society to the world will benefit the peoples of the USSR and increase international understanding of that complex society. The Kazakhstan government should finally allow a full and fair official investigation of the December 1986 events in Alma-Ata, and should make public the findings of an investigatory commission. It should investigate the actions of local officials and make legally accountable those who may be criminally liable.

* * *

Kazakhstan is the second largest republic in the Soviet Union, a vast territory of one million square miles -- populated by seventeen million people. Bounded by China to the east, the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan, Kirgizia and Turkmenia to the south, Kazakhstan shares a long northern border with the Russian Urals and Siberia.

Evidence has recently emerged of a long-standing potential border dispute with the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) over the Russian majority areas along the right bank of the Irtysh river. Such border disputes have been firmly rejected by Presidents Gorbachev and Nazarbayev. Since, however, the area is rich in minerals and oil, this dispute is likely to continue in some form further complicating Russian-Kazakh relations.³

In addition to its vast land mass -- into which California could fit four times -- Kazakhstan is endowed with a dazzling wealth of minerals. These resources have made Kazakhstan, along with the RSFSR and the Ukraine, key to the future of the Soviet Union. Kazakhstan's mineral wealth, which includes 95 percent of the world's supply of chrome, ensure that it will play an increasingly important

³ Charles Carson, "Kazakhs Refute Russian Territorial Claims," Report on the USSR, Radio Liberty, August 10, 1990.

international role as well.

Local control over republic income is a hot political issue in Kazakhstan. Officials told Helsinki Watch that Kazakhstan gets back from Moscow only seven percent of what it produces. The complex, and often inequitable, web of relations between Kazakhstan and the Soviet central authorities was a factor in the "December events" and continues to be a source of tension.

The President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, is determined to raise the living standards of Kazakhstan, which he claims are significantly lower than those in the rest of the country. Kazakhstan faces many major social problems, including abysmal health care, poor-quality consumer goods, high rates of alcoholism and drug abuse, high infant and male mortality rates, a chronic housing shortage, food rationing, and a rapidly increasing crime rate. As in most of Central Asia, Kazakhstan also faces high rates of unemployment among youth. Youthful dissatisfaction, fueled by joblessness, was a major source of the 1986 Alma-Ata disorders.

Although Kazakhstan is not a household name in America, it has been the site of many major experiments in Russian and Soviet history. Such notable phenomena as wholesale exile and deportation; forced labor in industry and agriculture; "Karlak," a vast prison and labor camp complex near Karaganda; Tselinograd, the center of Khrushchev's famous "virgin lands" experiment in increasing Soviet wheat production; Baikonur, the Soviet missile program site; and Semipalatinsk, the Soviet nuclear testing site -- all have taken place in Kazakhstan.⁴

The tsars began the long tradition of sending malcontents, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, to Kazakhstan exile. Under Stalin, millions were exiled to this republic. Entire national groups were sent to live -- or die -- in remote stretches of Kazakhstan. Kulaks (dispossessed private farmers) were ordered to grow food for the state on huge collective farms. The long and bloody process of collectivization resulted in the death of one third of the Kazakh population, or 1.5 million people.⁵ Soviet dissidents, such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, spent long years in the Karlak (the second largest gulag complex near Karaganda, Kazakhstan.)

Kazakhstan is home to one hundred nationalities, many of whom are descendants of exiled or deported peoples. While ethnic tension is present in the republic, the mix of nationalities seems to play a mitigating role at present. Ethnic rivalry between Russians and Kazakhs is present, however, and did play some role in the "December events."

The two major groups in Kazakhstan are Russians (who are 37.8% of the population) and Kazakhs (who are 39.7% of the population). (The 1989 census showed the Kazakhs outnumbering the Russians for the first time.) Germans are in third place with almost six million (or 5.8%); Ukrainians are in fourth place, also with almost six million. These figures show that the four largest nationalities represent some 85% of the Kazakhstan population. Uzbeks, Tatars, Uigurs and Byelorussians are the four next largest groups in Kazakhstan. As the new Grand Mufti of Kazakhstan noted, twenty three of the nationalities in Kazakhstan are traditionally Muslim.

Islam is the predominant religion in Kazakhstan, led by Radbek Nisanbai, who set up a new Muslim religious board for the republic. Under his direction, the Koran is being translated into Kazakh and an Islamic newspaper is being organized. Twenty-seven new mosques were built from private funds

⁴ See Jeri Laber's article "Stalin's Dumping Ground" in the New York Review of Books, October 11, 1990

⁵ Bohdan Nahaylo and Victor Swoboda, Soviet Disunion: A History of the Nationalities Problem in the USSR, The Free Press, 1990

in five months, giving Kazakhstan a total of 90 working mosques.

Environmental pollution is a key issue for the republic. Semipalatinsk, the site of the Soviet nuclear testing program, has caused pollution on a vast scale, leading to the formation of a citizens' group, the Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement. Popular environmental concern has led the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet to call for an end to nuclear testing in Semipalatinsk. The near-death of the Aral Sea is another major environmental issue; in June 1990, the first all-Central Asian republic meeting called for measures to save the Aral Sea.

Despite generally conservative political institutions, a few liberal deputies were elected recently. Former coal miner Marash Nurtazin -- who is now Deputy Chairman of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet -- told Helsinki Watch that a packet of liberal laws was being drafted for this fall's session. He asserted that republics with the best human rights guarantees would be in a position to make the best international trade agreements.

Citizens' groups in Kazakhstan have shown a rapid increase in number and range. The nationwide coal miners' strikes in July 1989 were observed in Karaganda, leading to the formation of the Workers' Strike Committee. In November of last year, fourteen groups formed an alliance, including the Green Front of Kazakhstan, the Alma-Ata Memorial group, the Birlesu independent labor association, and the Democratic Union.

Since that time, new appeals have been issued and political parties have been formed. Helsinki Watch was present at the first meeting of the Social Democratic Party in May 1990. Another new party, with 120 members, is the separatist National Democratic Party, formed from the Kazakh nationalist group, "Zholtoksan."

* * *

Helsinki Watch expresses its appreciation to the various individuals, groups, organizations and officials who assisted us during our visit to Kazakhstan. We would like to thank the people of Alma-Ata and Karaganda for their generosity, hospitality and friendliness.

Helsinki Watch also thanks Julie Moffett (Radio Liberty Russian Service) who translated the samizdat documents; and Elisabeth Socolow (Helsinki Watch Associate in Washington) who translated the Soviet medical records in the appendix. Helsinki Watch acknowledges the aid of Radio Liberty (RL) analysts Bess Brown, Ann Sheehy and Elizabeth Teague, and their reports on Kazakhstan and Central Asia. Sallie Wise, Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty U.S. Representative, and Paul Goble, Director of RL Research, gave us access to relevant Soviet media and the RFE-RL Daily Report.

The December 1986 Events: Underlying Issues

The "mass disorders" that occurred in Kazakhstan in December 1986 were the first such events under Gorbachev. Thousands of young people gathered on the streets of Alma-Ata on December 17 and 18 to protest the sudden Politburo decision to replace the long-time Kazakh leader Dinmukhamed A. Kunaev with Russian Party man Gennadi V. Kolbin as First Party Secretary of Kazakhstan. In the violence that ensued, at least three people were killed and hundreds were wounded; hundreds of others were detained and many were charged and sentenced.

What happened in Alma-Ata has never been made clear. Efforts by Helsinki Watch and two Kazakhstan-based groups -- the official "Shakhanov Commission" and the citizens' "Zholtoksan" (December) movement -- to investigate the "December events" have been hindered by an official reluctance to face facts -- or even to let others face them. When it comes to details about the "December events," an official policy of secrecy has prevailed.

Certain broad features of the "December events" are clear, but many key details are not. We know that the protests began peacefully, but we do not know which side initiated the violence. We know that the government used force, and that demonstrators were unarmed. We do not know whether the decision to use violence against the demonstrators was reached by local officials in Kazakhstan or by the central government in Moscow, but it is clear that Gorbachev was at least informed of the decision since the troops came from outside the republic. We know that the militia and military cadets were first on the scene and that Army and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) troops were summoned later, but it is unclear which units were deployed. We do not know the exact number of protesters: estimates range from 10,000 to 30,000. We know that the official death toll is three, but both local groups investigating the events suspect that there may have been more deaths. We know that most of the young Kazakh demonstrators were students, but it is unclear whether they were under the influence of alcohol and drugs, as some allege, and, if they were in fact given drinks and drugs, by whom?

An Inter-ethnic Conflict Between Kazakhs and Russians?

Some months after the December events, in July 1987, the Soviet Central Committee declared that the disorder had been a nationalist clash of Kazakhs against Russians. Many of the people Helsinki Watch interviewed in Kazakhstan rejected this view. They claimed that the protesters' opposition to the appointment of Gennadi Kolbin as First Party Secretary of Kazakhstan was based on Kolbin's total lack of experience in the republic, and not on the fact that he is Russian. Although the ethnic element should not be completely discounted, it appears that it was a subsidiary factor to the conflict. There is also reason to believe that ethnic tension was deliberately stirred up after the protests began.

It is significant that Mikhail Solomentsev, a Politburo member and chairman of the Communist Party committee in charge of discipline, arrived in Alma-Ata on December 18. According to some witnesses, he decided to send in Russian workers as auxiliary police in an effort allegedly intended to stir up ethnic hostility. It is also significant that on May 21, 1990, the USSR Central Committee officially removed the label of Kazakh nationalism from its assessment of the "December events."

A Local Political Protest Against Control by Moscow?

The main focus of the early demonstration seems to have been on arbitrary political control by Moscow. One protester, a Kazakh saleswoman, described her anger at Kolbin's appointment:

On the evening of December 16, I heard on the radio that Kolbin from Ulyanovsk had been named First Party Secretary for Kazakhstan. I was upset not because he is Russian, but because he is from another republic. I could not sleep, I was so upset.

Bakidzhan Mukuzhev, Deputy Director of Karaganda Radio, attributed some of the opposition to Kolbin to the poor education of the public:

Kazakhs from out-lying areas who participated in this event were not well educated. Some thought that naming someone from Ulyanovsk as Kazakhstan First Party Secretary was an insult. If the appointee had been a local Russian, it might have been different.

Kazakh lawyer Amanzhol Malibayev summed it up: "Kolbin came from Ulyanovsk and knew nothing of our problems."

Changes that have occurred in recent years in the Soviet Union have made it possible for people to speak more freely. As Kazakh radio journalist Bakidzhan Mukuzhev told Helsinki Watch:

In 1986, I could not have said this openly. But one-on-one, we said at the time: the protest was not against a Russian, but against Moscow's authoritarian pressure against the republics.

People's Deputy Mukhtar Shakhanov said that the highly centralized structure of the Party was largely to blame:

This tragedy might not have occurred if it had not been for the Party dictatorship from the Politburo. All people have the right to choose their own leaders. The Politburo decided to send Kolbin here and in 18 minutes he was unanimously elected.

Kazakh Power Struggle?

Some of the people interviewed by Helsinki Watch, Russians in particular, tended to see the "December events" as an expression of power struggles within the local Kazakh political elite. A member the Alma-Ata branch of "Memorial," said that "the rioters were opponents of the particular party faction that was put in power." Another "Memorial" activist said that the protestors "wanted a [specific] local leader to be chosen." Helsinki Watch received reports that some of the Kazakh students were organized by older men, possibly representatives of the Kunaev party faction.

It appears that the protestors may have had their own political candidates. Kazakh activist Malibayev declared: "The demonstrators raised questions about the government in general, naming Nazarbayev and Alibekov as the leaders they wanted." (In this the protestors were successful, since Alibekov is now a deputy specializing in nationality issues and Nazarbayev is the President of Kazakhstan.)

* * *

Each of these perspectives on the origins of the "December events" is feasible, and there is probably some truth in each of them. Taken together, they show the political complexities behind the unrest in Alma-Ata in December 1986.

The "December events" had national as well as local significance, ushering in what appears to be a new chapter in Soviet history. This new period has often been marked by instances of violent local unrest, motivated by a mixture of political, economic and nationalist grievances.

The human toll has already been high: Soviet Procurator General Aleksandr Sukharev stated in a Moscow Radio interview in August 1990 that 900 people have died in the USSR due to interethnic clashes in the last two years. Unfortunately, this toll is likely to escalate as Soviet citizens reel in fear or anger from wrenching changes in their daily lives. One major unanswered question is whether the Soviet government is doing -- or can do -- more to prevent or lessen the effects of such conflicts.

A Chronology of the December 1986 Events

In an effort to determine what actually took place during the disorder in Alma-Ata in December 1986, Helsinki Watch has established the following chronology:

Mid-September 1986: Kolbin's Appointment Becomes Known

People in Kazakhstan learned "through informal channels" that Gennady Kolbin, a Party functionary of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) with no experience of Kazakhstan, would be appointed First Party Secretary of their republic.

December 16, 1986: Kolbin Arrives in Alma-Ata

The Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Kazakhstan Communist Party, loyal to the dictates of Moscow, voted on December 16 without opposition to approve the Kolbin appointment as Party chief. Nevertheless, elements of the local Party, loyal to the veteran previous Kazakhstan Party chief, Dinmukhamed Kunaev, were known to be unhappy with the selection of Gorbachev loyalist Gennadi Kolbin. On December 16, Kolbin arrived in Alma-Ata.

December 17, 1986: The Battle Lines are Drawn

The Protestors Gather

On December 17, 1986, the protestors gathered from various parts of the city and from various institutes. They assembled in Brezhnev Square (now New Square). The witnesses agreed that the demonstrators, mostly young people, were peaceful.

One participant, who was later imprisoned for his role in the "December events," described the tense atmosphere at his place of work, and his reason for joining the protest:

I worked as an engineer in a radio store in Alma-Ata. On the morning of December 17, 1986, I left the store where I worked at about 11 a.m. On my way to work that morning, Russians made fun of me, saying, "You must be having a sad day. Kunaev is out." Russians in the store said, "Now you guys will get it. We'll show you."

Rumors were going around, now that the Russians were in control [of the Kazakhstan Communist Party]: "it's their land." I left work and joined a friend. In the square there was a peaceful demonstration, in which people said they wanted a local Russian, not from the center. (Erlan Dekelbayev)

Some were propelled to the square by curiosity, others by a desire to discuss Kolbin's appointment. One Kazakh saleswoman gave her view of the early stages of the protest:

Early on the morning of December 17, I went to see what people were thinking. I left home at 9 a.m. with my husband and younger brother. The road was blocked by peaceful demonstrators; we joined them on Brezhnev (re-named New Square) Square.

Others reportedly were recruited by Kazakh student activists. A member of the local Memorial chapter conducted his own extensive investigation of the "December events," talking to various eyewitnesses. He reported that Kazakh students not only recruited other Kazakh students, but sometimes used violence to persuade them to join.

From early morning, Kazakh students (from the agriculture, veterinary, economic, and construction institutes and from the university) formed columns, carried posters, and walked around to other institutes. They forced other Kazakhs to join them, beating up those who refused.

A man reported that his wife, who was behind locked doors at the pedagogical institute at noon on December 17, was excluded from the recruitment because she is Russian, but that she was frightened by the actions of the Kazakh activists:

She saw student groups shouting for people to join them. They told her since she's Russian, she did not have to join them. She was afraid. One week later, teachers told her that Kazakh students had been beaten up. Teachers locked themselves in their rooms; no teachers were hurt. At about 1:00 or 2:00 in the afternoon, students gathered in Brezhnev Square.

Official Reaction on Brezhnev Square

Most witnesses agreed that initially the government had not known how to react to the demonstrators. Witnesses disagreed on whether the protestors had been allowed to address the crowd and on whether the officials had spoken to the demonstrators.

One witness placed responsibility squarely on the government:

All this happened because the authorities acted stupidly. They are not used to talking to people. Kunaev refused to go before the crowd and try to calm them down. The militia was incapable of dealing with the crowd.

About 200 people came out on the square to protest with a petition. If the authorities had accepted the petition, matters would have ended right there.

(Only one source referred to a protest petition intended for officials.)

Early Sparring

According to some sources, government leaders did try to talk to the demonstrators:

The square was surrounded by unarmed soldiers. On the tribunal Nazarbayev, then Prime Minister, stood next to Kamalidenov, Third Party Secretary and KGB chief. They tried to talk with the protestors. One woman, a saleswoman, came forward; she complained about her economic situation.

Participant Dekelbayev reported that although the republic prosecutor threatened protestors with violence, government leaders did give demonstrators a chance to speak:

Party leaders appeared on the tribunal at about 1 p.m. At about 2:00 or 3:00, Party officials

summoned the demonstration leaders and gave them a chance to speak. These leaders were taken away by the police after they spoke. Procurator Elemisov appeared at about 6 p.m., saying, "if you do not disperse, we will use force."

People's Deputy Shakhanov singled out the unpopular Party appointee Kolbin as "not listening to [the protestors.]" Kazakh lawyer Malibayev confirmed that Kazakhstan Procurator Elemisov had used threats to try to disperse the demonstrators, and that "no negotiations" had been held with the protestors:

At first, the demonstration was rather peaceful. Only about 400 people took part. Then the crowd grew to 3,000. The government did not know how to behave ... They would not speak to the people. Elemisev, KSSR Deputy Prosecutor, threatened two or three times to use force to clear the square. No negotiations were held.

One witness said that demonstrators had seized, rather than been given access to, the microphones:

We were not allowed to speak. The Komsomol leader and Nazarbayev spoke from the tribune, telling us to go home. We sang Kazakh songs. Young people climbed the tribune and grabbed the microphone. Some made snowballs and threw them at the speakers. It was freezing. Many hours went by.

On the other hand, Erlan Dekelbayev, who spoke to the crowd, stated that protestors were brought to the microphone to speak. Officials urged speakers to ask the crowd to leave the square:

Those who spoke were then summoned by a group of officials who told them to get the demonstrators to stop. I told the crowd to stay calm and not to be taken in.

Kazakh musician, Khasen Kozhakhmetov, confirmed Dekelbayev's statement. Kozhakhmetov, who said he was on the square throughout the protest, said, "I made speeches urging non-violence, that students not confront the police, and that they leave the square."

A member of the Social Democratic Party, described how the demonstrators moved through the city, some getting rowdy in the process:

At first the crowd on the square was mostly peaceful. One column of demonstrators got away from the police and walked through the city. A small nucleus of protestors tried to keep order, but the rear of the column began to act like hooligans. Most people merely walked alongside the column, in a holiday-like mood, mostly Kazakh students.

The Local Militia

Sources said that the demonstrators subjected the local Kazakh militia to intense pressure to join them:

The Kazakh militia had refused to join the students. Some Kazakh militia were dragged into the

crowd and badly beaten. The militia ordered everyone to lie down. Demonstrators were put on buses, some forcibly, and taken to nearby villages and placed overnight in the big halls.

The Kazakh Auxiliary Police

A different law-and-order function was played by unarmed civil guards, many of whom seem to have been loyal young Kazakhs drawn from the Komsomol and local institutes. One young woman, whose brother served as a civil guard, described their deployment, saying that one role they played was to show protestors that not all Kazakhs approved of their actions:

My brother went to the demonstrations once, although he tried not to go. He is a Communist. The volunteer police were not armed and most did not speak Kazakh. I think they were selected to show that some Kazakhs were opposed to what was going on. These auxiliary police were drawn from the Komsomol and from research institutes.

The Military Cadets

Several witnesses pointed to the key role of local military cadets, mostly Kazakhs, during the early phases of the "December events." One eyewitness, a Kazakh saleswoman, said:

Before the troops arrived, there were students from specialized police academies. Most of these cadets were Kazakhs. They were ordered to stop the demonstrators, but were upset at having to follow these orders.

According to a witness, student border guards were armed with shovels even on the first day.

The Military Line-up

Based on his discussions with eyewitnesses, a man described the line-up of militia and soldiers -- augmented by armored personnel carriers -- in Brezhnev Square on December 17:

The militia was summoned; it formed another circle joining the circle of soldiers. Kunaev and Kolbin both refused to appear on the tribunal. Then regular army units showed up from Novosibirsk and Tashkent. Armored personnel carriers moved along Furmanov street at 6 p.m. in two columns. They divided as they turned into the square, making new circles and going through the militia lines.

The Dark Night of December 17 - 18

Troop Deployment

Additional troops -- to supplement the militia already in place -- were summoned from more distant republics during the night of December 17. It is still unclear who decided to call in the troops --

and at what level of government.

According to Sarsembay Sultanov, a member of "Zholtoksan" and an adviser to Deputy Shakhanov, Soviet leader Gorbachev must at least have been informed of the decision to send troops to quiet the Alma-Ata demonstrators:

Did Gorbachev decide to send troops into Alma-Ata? It is hard to say, but of course Gorbachev was informed of that decision. After all, the troops were sent from the RSFSR, from Chelyabinsk and Ufa. The troops were stationed on the streets for three days. No one knows if they were outside the city for longer than that.

Other sources said that on the night of December 17 - 18, troops were ordered to form three rings on Brezhnev Square.

(T)he square was ... surrounded by three circles: the outermost ring was comprised of MVD "spets-naz" [special] forces; the second was unarmed militia, and the innermost ring was comprised of volunteer police.

Demonstrators versus Troops

One female participant described her reaction to the troops which had just arrived on Brezhnev Square on the night of December 17 - 18:

When it became dark, the military troops came, surrounded by soldiers with sticks and shields. I couldn't tell if they were Russians or Kazakhs, since it was dark.

Another participant described when and why he decided to take part in rock-throwing:

Until then, I had not taken part in rock-throwing. But then I got angry at the army. Other guys encouraged me and I did throw a rock at a soldier. I did not hit him, however ... I went home that night at 23:30 p.m. (Erlan Dekelbayev, radio engineer)

The strong-arm recruiting activities of students continued during the night of December 17 - 18. According to a witness, some older men were reportedly involved:

After 3 a.m., the student columns left. The dorms were closed, teachers stood guard. Some older men called on students to storm the square in the morning. They forced their way into the dorms and beat up Kazakhs who refused to join them. Only the Sports Institute did not allow anyone into its dorm.

The role of the "older men" in urging students on to "storming the square" remains unexplained.

December 18: In the Throes of Battle

The Russian Auxiliary Police

Popular anger seemed to focus on the later recruitment of volunteer police drawn from local Russians. Witnesses felt that these Russian workers -- many from the Kirov factory -- were not really needed to maintain order, but that they had been recruited largely to inject hostility between local Russians and Kazakhs. The auxiliary police were deployed on December 18.

A representative of Alma-Ata "Memorial" supported the view that Russian workers were summoned to increase friction:

Authorities tried to establish order by summoning workers from the Kirov factory. Most of these workers were Russians and in this way friction was created.

In fact, this witness himself was recruited as an auxiliary policeman on December 18:

I work in a factory. We were sent to the city Communist Party headquarters, and ordered to gather outside Detsky Mir [a department store] which seemed to encourage demonstrators to gather in the square.

Kazakh lawyer Amanzhol Malibayev, an eyewitness, blamed Moscow for the December 18 decision to use Russian factory workers as auxiliary policeman to "control" the largely Kazakh demonstrators:

Why did they summon the volunteer police on December 18 since they did not need them for crowd control? Clearly they wanted to give the event nationalist flavor. They gave Russian workers these (metal) rods in order to provoke the Kazakh demonstrators. This was a decision made by Moscow.

Amanzhol Malibayev also claimed that the volunteer police, mostly Russian workers, were specially armed with steel rods. (He showed Helsinki Watch a statement signed by a chief engineer from a plant who ordered workers to get metal rods and to go the square.) He asserted the volunteer police had been summoned to "add nationalist flavor:"

There were 50,000 military troops and policemen and 20,000 local militia. Why did they summon the volunteer police on December 18 since they did not need them for crowd control? Clearly they wanted to give the event nationalist flavor. They gave these Russian workers metal rods to provoke the Kazakh demonstrators.

The Military Cadets

Protester Erlan Dekelbayev stated that the Kazakh student border guards were heavily armed on December 18: "Kazakh student border guards were specially selected to be on the square. They were

armed to the teeth."

The Final Battle

By the morning of December 18 both sides had turned to violence. According to some sources, a three-hour battle raged between demonstrators and military/militia forces:

In the morning, around 8:00, the storming of the square began again. The square was hard to defend. The Party organizations began to phone factories, taxi parks, etc. Men with steel rods went to the square in an organized fashion to get the Kazakhs out. A real battle went on. Kazakhs were storming the outermost circle. It was awful, but the order was given not to acknowledge any deaths (emphasis added).

By 11:00 a.m. everything was over.

Dekelbayev, who went to Brezhnev Square at 2:00 on the afternoon of December 18, said that events had not ended by 11 a.m. He saw a hostile standoff for two hours, and then at 4 p.m., clashes between the protestors and soldiers and police broke out anew:

All the traffic was delayed. The Russians at my work place were angry [due to the disruption caused by the demonstration.] They told me to go back to the square where "my" Kazakhs are.

At 2 p.m. I went to the square. On the way, we saw four Kazakh students who were talking to officials. Students stood shoulder-to-shoulder. The militia held metal rods, the border guards had shovels, the militia and soldiers had night sticks. I did not see any guard dogs. Kazakh student border guards were specially selected to be on the square. They were armed to the teeth. About 1,000 angry Kazakhs stood on the side streets leading to the square. The streets were blocked to keep people from the square.

At 4 p.m., a few Kazakh students began to throw rocks at the soldiers. They were all photographed. Soldiers then began their counter offensive using shovels, night sticks and metal rods.

Protester Dekelbayev summarized the balance of power in Brezhnev square on December 18: "All of these military units were on the square, facing the unarmed crowd on December 18."

The Role of the Military

It is difficult to arrive at a clear picture of the deployment and composition of the militia and military forces in Alma-Ata during the events of December 17 and 18. The local militia were summoned first; despite pressure, they stayed loyal to the government. Another group, students at the local KGB border guards' academy, was also deployed early. In addition, an important role seems to have been played by untrained auxiliary police drawn from two contrasting labor pools: educated, loyal Kazakhs and Russian factory workers.

One resource said that regular army troops (from Novosibirsk and Tashkent) were deployed on Brezhnev Square after the militia was in place. By the evening of December 17, MVD "spets naz" troops

appeared. Demonstrator Dekelbayev said that the "spets-naz" MVD troops came from "Tashkent, Tbilisi, Sverdlovsk and Frunze." Only one witness, an auxiliary policeman on December 18, said that parachute troops arrived late in the day.

Disturbances in Other Cities

On the day when disturbances began in Alma-Ata, there were also clashes in Karaganda, Tselinograd and Pavlodar. In Karaganda, Helsinki Watch was given a description of the local echo of the Alma-Ata events of December 1986:

About 200 Kazakh students demonstrated in solidarity with the Alma-Ata students. They were removed, expelled from schools and institutes and expelled from the Komsomol. One year later, they were reinstated and rehabilitated.

According to several witnesses, social tension in Alma-Ata and other parts of Kazakhstan remained high for several months. In fact, a samizdat report dated December 1989 and appended to this report, states that instances of social unrest occurred in an even larger number of cities: "The events widened to include Alma-Ata, Karaganda, as well as Dzezkazgan, Aktyubinsk, Mangyshlak, East Kazakhstan, Taldy-Kurgan, Tselinograd and other oblasts."

Official Reaction and Responsibility

Temporary Restrictions on News and Travel

Soviet local and national authorities did not impose a state of emergency in Alma-Ata. Kazakh lawyer Sarsenbai Sultanov described restrictions on news and travel imposed after the December 1986 unrest in the following way:

No state of emergency was declared, but journalists were not allowed to come to Kazakhstan. There were no special measures, no curfew was announced. Although I did not know for how long, the Alma-Ata airport and railways were closed for some time.

"A Kazakh Nationalist Manifestation"

One eyewitness, Kazakh lawyer Amanzhol Malibayev, claimed it was Mikhail Solomentsev, Politburo member and chairman of the Communist Party committee in charge of discipline, who first gave a blatantly nationalist color to the December 1986 events: "Solomentsev arrived (from Moscow) at midnight on December 17. He was the first to label the protests a "Kazakh nationalist uprising." That night, they began organizing the Russian workers." (The Kremlin's choice of Solomentsev as its emissary was, to use a favorite Soviet phrase, not accidental -- he had served in the republic -- along with Leonid Brezhnev.)

Adding insult to injury -- at least as far as Kazakh activists were concerned -- was a Central Committee resolution, issued in July 1987, which characterized the December 1986 events as a "manifestation of Kazakh nationalism." Some Kazakh activists, such as lawyer Sarsenbai Sultanov, think that Gorbachev may have been connected to this resolution.

Indeed, repeal of this label became a key issue of the popular 1989 movement to investigate the December 1986 disorders. In November 1989, the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet rejected this label, as well as a major samizdat appeal signed by 25,000 people and by twelve informal groups on December 12, 1989.

In May 1990, Deputy Shakhanov called attention to the continued strength of popular feeling on this issue. He also asserted that those Soviet officials responsible for the December events should be removed from their posts:

Recently, four people went on hunger strike to force the authorities to remove the label of nationalism from those who demonstrated in December 1986. The fasters also pointed out that those [officials] who were really responsible for these events are still in high Party posts. Far from being punished, they were sent elsewhere to even higher posts.

A Central Committee Recantation

When Helsinki Watch met with Deputy Shakhanov on May 22, 1990, he reported that the Central Committee on May 21 had issued a resolution saying that it had been a mistake to label the December 1986 events a "manifestation of Kazakh nationalism." Shakhanov declared, "This is a great victory for us."

Official Responsibility?

A samizdat document, dated December 1989, signed by 25,000 people in Kazakhstan, cites the names and positions of national and Kazakhstan officials considered "responsible for the cruel suppression of the demonstration" and for the "mass persecutions and punishments which followed the events." (A complete English-language translation of this document is appended to this report.)

The document states:

Today it is time to name the specific people who were responsible for the cruel suppression of the demonstration. They were: M.S. Solomentsev, a former member of the Politburo of the Communist Party Central Committee; G.V. Kolbin, former First Secretary of the Kazakhstan Communist Party Central Committee; Z.K. Kamalidenov, former Secretary of the Kazakhstan Communist Party Central Committee; General-Colonel V.N. Lobov, former Commander of the Central Asian Military District; General-Colonel B.K. Elisov, First Soviet Deputy Internal Affairs Minister; and A.T. Kniازهv, Minister of Kazakhstan Internal Affairs.

The persons responsible for the mass persecutions and punishments which followed the events are: G.B. Elemisov, Kazakhstan Prosecutor; T.K. Aitmukhambetov, Supreme Court Chairman; V.M. Miroshnik, KGB Chairman; Dospolov, Kazakhstan Justice Minister.

The above-mentioned highly placed persons promoted the dissemination of disinformation in the mass media about the real reason behind the "December events." This resulted in a real burst of inter-ethnic tensions, reflected in the accusation of the Kazakh nation as seen in the well-known Communist Party Central Committee decree, "On the Manifestation of Kazakh Nationalism."

These allegations, supported by 25,000 citizens of Kazakhstan, represent a major crisis of confidence in these high-ranking Soviet and Kazakhstan government and Party officials. As far as is known, these officials have never faced any Party or government inquiry of their actions during the "December events." The longer the suppression of reliable and comprehensive information on the Alma-Ata disorders lasts, the more the public will lose confidence in the government and Party.

Crowd Control

As the "December events" and all too many other recent instances of inter-ethnic conflict make clear, Soviet authorities need to reform their techniques of crowd control. Not only does the 1988 law on demonstrations need to be redrafted, but so does legislation empowering MVD "Special Units," the militia, and other military units which engage in crowd control. This is particularly true of the expressed increased reluctance of the Soviet army - especially after the Tbilisi tragedy of April 1989 in which 20 peaceful demonstrators were killed - to engage in crowd control. In this regard, the local and Soviet authorities' heavy reliance on totally untrained local manpower - such as the auxiliary police - is a practice which should be reconsidered.

Recent Restrictions on Freedom of Assembly

According to a samizdat document, signed by 25,000 and dated December 1989 (appended to this report), Kazakhstan authorities adopted a decree in November of last year which "bans unsanctioned demonstrations, meetings and assemblies." (In Soviet usage, "unsanctioned" usually refers to demonstrations which have not followed the proper (cumbersome) procedures under the 1988 demonstration law to gain official permission.)

An excerpt from this citizens' appeal reveals more details about this new law:

Strike out those paragraphs in the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet Decree of November 14, 1989: "On Measures to Strengthen Socialist Law and Order in the Republic" which ban unsanctioned demonstrations, meetings and assemblies. This ban is contradictory to international law as well as to the building of a legal society.

If the citizens' information is accurate, Helsinki Watch calls on the Kazakhstan authorities to remove this ban on public meetings. The Kazakhstan authorities' perception that such a law is needed -- in the name of "Law and Order" -- is clearly part of the unfortunate legacy of the "December events."

This law, which violates international law and Helsinki commitments, is also contrary to the long-term interest of the republic. Blanket denials of the rights of citizens to peacefully assemble to express their views never aid in the resolution of political and social problems; rather, these bans prolong them.

Nature of the Violence

Violence by Demonstrators

Although it is generally agreed that violence was used by both sides, the demonstrators were armed only with rocks, saplings, sticks -- and the ability to commit arson. A "Memorial" activist described how the demonstrators armed themselves with what was at hand on December 17:

The Kazakhs began breaking off parts of the building and threw stones at the tribunal... At about 8 p.m., new columns of Kazakh students arrived with sticks and stones and empty bottles. They tried to push their way through these circles (of military and militia troops.) Their efforts continued until 3 a.m.

A participant in these events, Dekelbayev, said, "fire engines were brought in to dampen the crowds. The demonstrators threw rocks at the fire engines."

Some Kurdish witnesses described the battle lines this way:

The Kazakhs attacked the unarmed cadets with stones. They also broke trees, and overturned and burned cars. After the fire engines arrived, they beat the drivers and overturned the fire-engines. Without guns, they fought. It was soldiers with shovels versus drunken students.

Violence by the Armed Forces

Witnesses interviewed by Helsinki Watch agreed that military cadets, especially the KGB border guards, wielded sappers' shovels to bloody effect. Steel rods, wielded by the auxiliary police on December 18, also took their toll. There were conflicting reports on whether other groups, including the militia, used steel rods. Two eyewitnesses said that night-sticks had been used by the militia and troops; their views are confirmed by the samizdat "Shakhanov Commission" report. Others reported that pressurized water from fire engines had been used on a cold night.

Dekelbayev said he had not seen dogs being used, although Deputy Shakhanov and lawyer Amanzhol Malibayev claimed they had evidence that police dogs had been used against demonstrators.

As for major pieces of military hardware, there is conflicting evidence. Some witnesses mention that there were two tanks, while others refer to armored personnel carriers. No one spoke of the use of guns or machine guns against the demonstrators.

Deputy Shakhanov, who heads the official commission investigating the December 1986 events, asserted: "The bodyguards and the MVD troops used shovels and guard dogs. First the government denied this, but [the members of the official commission] have specific facts."

Participant Dekelbayev described how various military and militia forces were armed on December 18:

The militia held metal rods, the border guards had shovels, the militia and soldiers had night-sticks. I did not see any guard dogs. Kazakh student border guards were specially selected to be on the square. They were armed to the teeth.

Sappers' Shovels

A recent article, written by Soviet journalist Samoilenko, which appeared in the Literary Gazette of December 24, 1989, denied reports that sappers' shovels had been used against demonstrators in December 1986. Witnesses, however, reported to Helsinki Watch that they had been used. Erlan Dekelbayev was one such witness. The "Shakhanov Commission" initial findings also confirm the extensive use of shovels.

Beatings

Beatings were probably the most frequent form of attack, primarily by the militia and soldiers, but also by demonstrators. One protestor described her efforts to save a young demonstrator from a severe beating:

I was badly beaten. I was warned by a soldier: "Leave on the orders of Moscow." I tried to help a young man who was being held by his hair; he was beaten and bleeding. So I took the soldier by the hair. It was three soldiers to one young man. Then they took my arm and pulled it behind me. I started to scream and one soldier put my hat in my mouth. I was then taken away and later released. I saw many young women who were beaten, with blood on their hair and from their noses.

The beatings sometimes led to severe injuries or even death:

I saw a guy who was carried away by students. A medical student measured his pulse. It was unclear if he was alive or dead or if he had been badly beaten.
(Erlan Dekelbayev)

Initiation of Violence

Witnesses gave Helsinki Watch conflicting reports on which side had initiated the violence. Several sources indicated the armed forces reacted with force (hitting people with metal rods or sappers' spades, or beatings) to demonstrators throwing rocks (at the militia/military, at the tribunal, or state property such as fire engines or cars.)

A man said the violence began when Kazakh protestors threw stones at the tribunal:

The Kazakhs began breaking off parts of the building and throwing stones at the tribunal. Then, fire trucks were summoned. One car was overturned, a second car escaped. The first car was burned and pushed toward the soldiers.

Participant Dekelbayev gave a somewhat different version of events, saying that violence began after demonstrators threw rocks at fire engines -- after they had been drenched with cold water on a winter night:

About 8 p.m. that evening, fire engines were brought in to dampen the crowds. The demonstrators threw rocks at the fire engines. Also at about 8 p.m., at the two far ends of the square, two big military cars were blown up at the same time.

Early on, the KGB student border guards started using sappers' shovels. A witness said his sources told him:

They then summoned students from the KGB border guard academy who carried short spades (emphasis added). These students fought with demonstrators. Authorities said they didn't hurt anyone with shovels, they just pushed people away. The Kazakhs say people were hit.

Provocations?

Several witnesses claimed that the violence was the result of provocations, ranging from an inflammatory radio program, to the throwing of a policeman's hat, to the distribution by police of firecrackers and "anasha" (hashish). Mention was also made of a professional KGB provocateur who allegedly encouraged the crowd to use violence.

Dekelbayev referred to a local radio program (the government had a monopoly on mass media such as radio) which accused Kazakh students of violence:

After 6 p.m. when the KSSR procurator spoke, a radio program went on the air claiming that Kazakh students were attacking nurseries and schools. This was done to increase hostility.

Malibayev, an eyewitness, said the "provocateur" who threw the policeman's hat began the violence:

Between 7 and 8 p.m., someone took off a policeman's hat and threw it. Police used dogs, water, sticks; they had two tanks. This was the start. I think the man who threw the hat was a provocateur. It was very cold.

A third eyewitness, in describing how the police distributed narcotics, stated that it was this action -- and the ensuing arrests -- which precipitated the violence:

Policemen walked through the tightly packed crowd and put boxes of narcotics in people's pockets. I saw these people being arrested a few moments later. When I asked why they had been arrested, I was told it was because they possessed "anasha" (hashish-like substance which is smoked).

The "anasha" had been in small boxes similar to those in which pills are packaged in the USSR. As the police arrested these people, others tried to defend them. The square erupted. Officials announced that if the crowd did not disperse, they would summon the troops.

Dekelbayev said he had seen a man in a militia car trying to give firecrackers to demonstrators:

In the middle of the square, when it got dark, a militia car loaded with firecrackers appeared. I myself saw a box full of fire crackers. I saw a guy, who was holding a box, shout at the crowd to come and get the firecrackers.

A witness stated that vodka was also distributed:

At about 10 o'clock, vodka and marijuana were brought. (Many, many people told me this. Maybe they were wrong, but it was a widespread view.) The sale of alcohol was forbidden on that day.

Another witness also mentioned that "vodka had appeared" in the square. If indeed the sale of alcohol was banned on December 17, only officials could have had access to alcohol.

One witness who claimed to have access to preliminary findings of the Shakhanov Commission stated, "KGB agent Marat Kamzoldin provoked the crowd by shouting and by encouraging it to fight."

The Human Toll

Official Medical Records

Two official Soviet medical records appear as Appendices D and E to this report. One deals with demonstrators who required hospitalization, and one with protestors who received out-patient medical assistance. They reveal that most of the injured protestors were Kazakh workers and students. Of the 369 cases requiring hospital treatment, 363 were Kazakhs; there were also two Russians, one Turkmen, a Chechen, an Armenian, and a Bashkir. Two hundred eighty-five men -- compared to 84 women -- needed medical treatment. The protestors' average age is 25; the youngest was 15, the oldest 74. Workers and students received most casualties, with students comprising 35 percent of the casualties and workers comprising another 31 percent.

As for the type of injuries treated, 243 were in the head or neck; there were also many fractures of the arms and legs as well as blunt wounds on the torso. Some injuries were obviously inflicted while the victim was in a defensive stance; for example, fractures of the radial arm bone are apparently due to the use of an arm as a shield. Many of the injured refused to reveal their identities, most likely due to fear of punishment for involvement in the disorder.

Medical Treatment

Helsinki Watch received widely differing testimonies on the quality of medical treatment provided to the protestors. One participant said "Ambulance staff on the scene would only help the military." A witness who claimed to have access to the files of the Shakhanov Commission reported:

Wounded demonstrators were "treated" only by Russian doctors who refused to give real medical treatment. Wounds were treated with hot water. Kazakh doctors were all arrested. Many of the wounded did not seek medical assistance since they feared arrest.

These views were rejected by a Kurdish doctor who was on medical duty the night of December 17. He said, "I was on duty at the hospital -- as all doctors in Alma-Ata were. All doctors, regardless of nationality, treated all the wounded."

This Kurdish physician recounted an incident he saw of anti-Russian feeling expressed by a wounded Kazakh student: "I saw an ambulance with Russian doctors caring for a wounded Kazakh student. This student said, "You Russian bastards, get out of here."

Fatalities

Widespread rumors -- fueled by the dearth of reliable public information on the subject -- speculated that there were numerous fatalities, perhaps numbering in the hundreds. The Shakhanov report admitted that the official commission had been unable to confirm such rumors. Bess Brown wrote in "The Alma-Ata Events of 1986 Reexamined" ([Radio Liberty Report](#), February 9, 1990):

It now seems clear there were three fatalities in connection with the disturbances: two Slavs -- a volunteer policeman Savitsky, and a controller at a truck depot, Aristov -- were killed outright; and a Kazakh student, Sypataev, died in hospital of injuries received while fighting with law-enforcement authorities.

Shakhanov's report noted that Aristov's name is not mentioned in official reports as having any connection with the disturbances, although M.T. Abdykulov, who stabbed Aristov to death on a bus the day after the disturbances were ended, was sentenced to death for having committed a murder during the disorders.

Deputy Shakhanov referred to two deaths during an interview with Helsinki Watch on May 22, 1990, but he seemed doubtful of that figure:

The security forces are responsible for several beatings and rape, and even forced some people to commit suicide. So far, only two deaths have been officially recognized. This is something which (the Commission) must check further. There are some very strange signals.

Shakhanov went on to make clear why he had grounds to think that other instances of violence by security forces occurred -- because his group had been denied access to crucial information on this key issue. Indeed, Shakhanov pointed out that the Commission had been promised access to the official records of deaths only three days earlier:

So far, we have had no access to the records of deaths. But three days ago, we got indications that we will have access to all the official records. The use of force by the government was excessive.

Continuing public sensitivity on the crucial question of fatalities can be seen in the following excerpt from a samizdat document, dated December 1989 and signed by 25,000 (Appendix C). Far from accepting the official death total, this document claims that the official "Shakhanov Commission" was pressured not to investigate possible additional instances of death connected to the "December events:"

Under pressure from certain members of the former Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet Commission to investigate the "December events," as well as from some other officials, a special paragraph was included in the decree on the 15th session of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet which stated that rumors about a large number of victims were not confirmed. We would be very glad if these "rumors" were only rumors. We know, however, that the commission did not investigate a single instance in which it was informed of victims.

Injuries

Kazakh lawyer Amanzhol Malibayev summarized official documents on the numbers of hospitalizations: "83 persons (72 men and 11 women; 82 Kazakhs and one Bashkir; mainly students and workers) were taken to hospital." According to another official document which Malibayev showed Helsinki Watch on medical treatment of patients who did not require hospitalization: "286 were treated and sent home." (The photos shown to Helsinki Watch revealed some badly battered demonstrators.

These were patients who were treated and released.)

Statistics on Detentions

Witnesses gave various statistics on the numbers of people detained and/or arrested after the December 1986 protests. According to one witness who claimed to have access to the preliminary "Shakhanov Commission" findings: "Official statistics say that over 600 were detained after the December 1986 events. According to "Zholtoksan" leader Malibayev, "official documents report that 99 persons were imprisoned, and 631 were under surveillance ("under control"). All of these people were eventually punished -- either administratively or by fines."

Individual Arrests

Witnesses interviewed by Helsinki Watch did not always make a distinction between detentions and arrests, so it is difficult to arrive at definitive total figures.

Several witnesses with whom Helsinki Watch spoke described their own detentions or arrests as being entirely without foundation. One such witness is Mikhail Kubekov:

I was there (on Brezhnev Square) on December 17 at 3 p.m., taking notes. I was arrested when I got home that day. My notes were confiscated. On December 24, I was freed from KGB detention, after signing a promise not to leave the area.

Another arrestee described his arrest:

I was arrested on December 18, as I was walking with a crowd down a street. I was arrested by Russian volunteer guards from a factory. Among those who were arrested, there were 23 women. I was detained from 5 p.m. until midnight.

My second arrest occurred on February 6, 1987. I was held in prison until April 22. I was held in prison, alone among criminals. The police asked the criminals to beat me, but they refused. (Kazakh musician, Khasen Kozhakhmetov)

A particularly disturbing case is that of Gabiden Mumageldinovich Bolekov, a worker, born in 1962. According to Kaldybai Abenov, a member of "Zholtoksan," "(Bolekov) never was on the square where the demonstration was held on December 17 and 18. On the night of December 18, he was caught at night far from this square, on the edge of the city."

Convictions

Official documents showed that a total of 99 people were tried and received various sentences in prisons and/or labor camps for their role in the "December disorders." A few such cases have been highlighted in the Soviet media, including that of Zh. A. Sabitova, a school teacher, who was convicted of incitement for preparing a poster and leaflets which supposedly aroused inter-ethnic hostility. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* reported on July 1, 1987, that she received a five-year term in a general regimen

labor colony and lost the right to teach for five years after that.

Another similar article, entitled "Alma-Ata: Criminals, punishment," *Argumenti i Fakti* (#25, 1987) described the trial of five young men convicted for their violent acts during the Alma-Ata protests: two first-year architecture students, K. Ryskulbekov and E. Kopesbaev; Zh. Taidzhumaev, an energy institute student; T. Tashenov, a carpenter; and K. Kuzembaev, a welder.

Ryskulbaev and Kopesbaev were accused of "totally losing control over their actions" during their attack on militia sergeant A.A. Almabekov, as well as of taking part in grave criminal acts which led to the death of volunteer policeman S.A. Savitsky. Kuzembaev was accused of "a particularly aggressive role" in the beating of hospitalized MVD Major I.P. Zimulkin, while Taidzhumaev allegedly threatened the life of auxiliary policeman G.G. Vedel. The court sentenced Ryskulbekov to death-by-firing squad; Tashenov and Taidzhumaev received 15-year terms; Kuzembaev was sentenced to a 14-year term, while Kopesbaev received a four-year term of forced labor in a strengthened regimen colony.

In separate trials, K. Rakhmetov, a former Komsomol secretary in the physics department of Kazakh State University, was convicted for inciting students to disobey police orders; and M. Asylbaev, an unemployed alcoholic who took part in the riots and incited others to assault the police, was also sentenced.

Kazakhstan authorities stressed that only those who had actually broken the law -- such as by engaging in vandalism or violence -- had been punished, not those who had been "passive participants." Republican leaders also tried to portray leaders as allies of the corrupt and discredited Party chief Kunaev.

Conditions of Detention

One witness, who claimed to have access to the "Shakhanov Commission" files, said the commission had uncovered one killing amidst the following gruesome conditions for female detainees:

The "Lenin" Alma-Ata Regional MVD had a special cell only for young women students who had been part of the demonstrations. The walls were covered with blood. The women were forced to kneel on the floor. One girl, who couldn't kneel, stood up. A soldier hit her with a shovel, splitting her head in two.

Deputy Shakhanov confirmed that his commission had found that "women (prisoners) were treated bestially."

Another arrested protestor, Khasen Kozhakhmetov, described conditions of detention this way:

In the detention prison, people were crowded into three rooms. The women were in another room. We all had to stand and were beaten as we were interrogated. I was in prison from 5 p.m. until midnight. Then I showed my television studio ID card, they photographed me, and I was released.

Abenov told Helsinki Watch that Bolekov, the Kazakh worker detained on the night of December 18, "had been tied by KGB officers to a very hot radiator and beaten all night."

The widespread reports of beatings of prisoners by guards should be investigated and those responsible should receive appropriate sanctions. If the reported killing by a soldier of the "girl who stood up in the cell" is accurate, the case should be investigated and brought to trial.

Other Punitive Measures

Helsinki Watch has in its files Russian language copies of two official documents on the punitive measures undertaken. The first one is a list of those 631 people (names and basic data) who were put under police surveillance, and the second is a more detailed list of 41 Party members who were expelled for their role in the "December events."

Malibayev reported that official documents showed:

Six hundred thirty-one were "under control." Of 36 Party members who took part in the demonstration, all were later expelled from the party. Officially, 910 were detained, but 276 other names [whose photographs he managed to get] do not appear on any official lists. Therefore, at least 276 additional people were wounded.

Kubekov also claimed that "we still cannot find many people whose [official] photos we have." He described the results of one effort to find these missing people:

We showed these photos at a New Year's celebration, hoping that people would come forth. One young woman recognized a friend and said she had committed suicide a few months after the December events.

The "Shakhanov Commission" report (Appendix A) details the following:

The MVD organs detained 2,401 persons for participation in the mass unrest. In addition, 5,324 persons were questioned in the procuracy and 850 by the KGB. Three hundred twenty-six cases were directed to People's Courts which decided cases of administrative responsibility, 108 were fined and 3 were sentenced to the corrective labor camps. Of these cases, the commission managed to acquaint itself with the case materials for 201 individuals...According to official reports, 182 persons were expelled from educational institutions, but 136 of them were reinstated. Fifty-three were expelled from the Communist Party; 210 Party members were reprimanded; 758 people were expelled from the Komsomol and 1,104 members of the Komsomol were reprimanded.

Criminal Charges

Witnesses who had been charged with criminal activity for their alleged role in the December 1986 demonstrations described their cases. Mikhail Kubekov, for example, discussed an effort to frame him on criminal charges:

At the demonstration, I only took notes. But I was charged with wrecking a military car and shooting at a building -- they could not prove these charges. The authorities also said I had burned a red flag, but they could not prove that either. I never stood trial since none of these charges could be proven.

Not all were as fortunate as Kubekov. Kazakh worker Bolekov never stood trial, but he spent one year in a psychiatric hospital. During that time, he was given injections which seem to have

permanently impaired his ability to function:

Bolekov was accused of violating four articles of the criminal code, including "inter-ethnic hostility," "mass disorders" and "possession of drugs." None of these charges could be proven against him and so he never stood trial.

Despite the lack of charges against him, Bolekov was held for one year in the Alma-Ata Special Psychiatric Hospital where he was given injections which made him forgetful. Since that time, Bolekov has been unable to hold down a job. (Kazakh Film Director, Kaldybai Abenov)

Dekelbayev, for his involvement in the December 1986 events, was summoned by the KGB and told, "Your song is over." He was sentenced to six years of imprisonment for "inter-ethnic hostility" and "mass disorders." This long sentence was, as he put it, "for my two days' activity at this time." He maintained that his activities on Brezhnev Square had been limited to making speeches calling for non-violence and to throwing a rock at a soldier.

Another participant in the December 1986 protests, Kazakh lawyer Amanzhol Malibayev, was arrested in January 1987. He was later sentenced to five years in prison under article 65 ("anti-State activity.")

Khasen Kozhakhmetov -- a rather well-known Kazakh musician -- described his trial, ascribing an important role to public opinion in reducing his sentence:

My trial began on April 22, 1987, and lasted six days. I was charged with violating articles 62 ("anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda"), 65 ("organizing demonstrations and mass disorders"), and 170-1 ("anti-Soviet slander"). Charges under the first two articles were dropped. Under article 170-1 I was given four years' strict regimen camp.

My family searched a long time to find a lawyer; most lawyers did not want to be involved in "December" cases. The lawyer said I was innocent and asked for my release from prison.

Many witnesses were called, but the judge ruled more harshly than the prosecutor or the lawyers. The judge actually sentenced me on all three articles, but due to local public opinion, I only got a four-year term. (Artists had written to Kolbin on my behalf.) I served two years, two months and one day and I was released on March 7, 1989.

Prison Conditions

Helsinki Watch was given differing reports on the prison conditions encountered by "December" prisoners after they had been convicted. Amanzhol Malibayev reported that he had not been maltreated, although he was assigned very heavy physical labor:

I was not physically maltreated in prison. I was, however, given the most difficult labor

to do. I worked outside, in summer and winter, preparing concrete. When I left prison, I was given 100 rubles for all the work I had done.

Kozhakhmetov also said that he had had to work "very hard in labor camp, sawing and carrying wood." Malibayev reported, however, that other December prisoners had fared much worse than he had in prison:

Many young people were maltreated in prison. Some were put against hot radiators -- the prisons were very cold. They were not allowed to wear additional clothing, despite the severe conditions. I was not beaten, but saw others being beaten. I was punished by not being allowed to see my relatives, and my wages were delayed.

Dekelbayev mentioned that he had served his term in four prisons: Dzhambul, Gurev, Alma-Ata and Karaganda. In Gurev, there were 25 prisoners who had been sentenced for their role in the December events.

Other Consequences

Loss of Employment

Mikhail Kubekov lost his job teaching history at a local high school after he quit the Party to protest its role in the December events. Erlan Dekelbayev, who had worked as a radio engineer before his prison term, said, "I now work as a stevedore."

Kazakh musician Kozhakhmetov said that after his release from prison he could not find a job for three months. Then his friends wrote letters in his behalf and he got a job as a TV music editor. Kozhakhmetov is still trying to get compensation for the income he lost during the time he was unjustly imprisoned.

Health Problems

One former prisoner reported continuing health problems. "I have had two ear operations and my health is bad after my time in prison." (Erlan Dekelbayev)

Destruction of Family Life

Amanzhol Malibayev described how prison had destroyed his family life:

Prison was a great tragedy for my personal life. My wife and 8-year-old son were put under observation. When I left prison, they said they did not want to live with me anymore. I had nowhere to live and had to ask to stay in prison until morning. They refused to allow me to stay there, since my release had actually been declared ten days earlier. So, I lived at my sister's place for two months.

Two Recent Prisoner Releases

Malibayev gave the case histories of two "December" prisoners who had been recently released after protest hunger strikes by members of "Zholtoksan":

Dzhambulbek Taidzhumayev (student of electro-technology, born in 1962) was sentenced to 15 years; he was imprisoned for 3.5 years before his early release.

Kahirgeldi Kuzinbayev (a worker born in 1959). He was sentenced to 14 years, was first considered a murderer, then was held on purely political grounds. He is now very ill and both his legs may have to be amputated.

Malibayev also provided some information on the last two "December" prisoners remaining in prison:

Turgelbay Tashenov, a protest leader, (a worker, born in 1961) was given a 15-year sentence, now reduced to six years.

Merzagaly Abdukulov (born in 1951) was given a 20-year sentence under articles 60, 65, 88. He is accused of murder.

A Mysterious Death in Prison

Two members of "Zholtoksan," Amanzhol Malibayev and Kaldybai Abenov, expressed great concern over the 1988 death in prison of a "December" prisoner, Kairat Rysulbekov. Soviet prison officials claim that he committed suicide; Malibayev and Abenov doubted these claims and said that "Zholtoksan" was investigating further.

The following description of the Ryskulbekov case was given to Helsinki Watch by Kaldybai Abenov:

Background: Kairat Ryskulbekov, a student who died in prison, was sentenced to death for killing someone in a bus in December 1986. The KGB would not allow him to be released, since he already had been sentenced to death.

Chronology: On May 7, 1988 Ryskulbekov's death sentence was commuted to 20 years. On May 13, the recidivist Vlasenko was put in Ryskulbekov's cell. On the night of May 20 - 21, Ryskulbekov died in prison; the official version of his death was that it was a suicide.

Cellmate's Testimony: Vlasenko said they sat together until 4 a.m., then Vlasenko went to sleep. At 4:20 a.m. Vlasenko got up to go to the toilet and saw Ryskulbekov hanging from a hook. Rysulbekov had taken Vlasenko's undershirt to make a noose to hang himself, yet his own clean undershirt was lying on his bed.

A Suicide Note? Vlasenko claimed that Rysulbekov had written a letter either to his mother or to the KGB. He also said that Rysulbekov had swallowed the letter. Yet those

who have seen the letter said the paper is clear and clean and totally unwrinkled. This physical evidence contradicted Vlasenko's claim that Rysulbekov swallowed the letter.

The letter reveals other contradictions. Ryskulbekov was from southern Kazakhstan, yet the writer's dialect was northern. In fact, it was the dialect of someone from Semipalatinsk -- the area in which Ryskulbekov was imprisoned. The different dialect can be seen by comparing this letter with one he had written recently. In the first letter, he often refers to family work in the garden and used lots of endearing first names in addressing his relatives. In this last letter, these personal and stylistic features characteristic of southerners were absent.

The Prison Telegram: On May 21, 1989, at 18:20, a cable was sent from Semipalatinsk prison to Ryskulbekov's family in southern Kazakhstan. His family sent a return telegram at 22:10 in which they refused to go to the funeral.

It is improbable that a family would refuse to come to the funeral of their relative, leading one to doubt the authenticity of the telegrams. Ryskulbekov was buried in great haste on May 22, 1988. Such haste gives rise to some suspicion that the prison officials and the KGB may not have wanted outsiders to see the body.

Physical Evidence: Two Baltic specialists on physical evidence were brought in (by "Zholtoksan") to examine the noose and hook. They concluded that hook was too small to have carried the weight of his body, and that the undershirt was a strange and awkward choice for a noose.

Malibayev summarized those aspects of the Ryskulbekov case which made his death seem suspicious:

He killed himself under strange conditions. We had gotten a hopeful letter from him in which he wrote that he thought his name would be cleared and that everything would be all right.

After Ryskulbekov's death sentence had been commuted to 20 years -- he had been on death row for eleven months -- ten days later, he committed suicide.

The Prison Release Process

Malibayev described the long appeals process and the role of public opinion in gaining his release from prison:

I spent two years in prison and wrote many appeals which were ignored. After two years and ten days, I was summoned on February 22, 1988, and told I could leave. I think it was due to public opinion.

I did not want a pardon which meant that I would have had to admit guilt. The officials showed me a document which decreased my sentence, signed by the Deputy Procurator.

Since the document did not imply any admission of guilt, I signed it.

Rehabilitation

Kozhakhmetov discussed how he received an official rehabilitation paper -- which many former "December" prisoners still do not have:

First, my prison term was reduced, probably due to the pressure of public opinion. I was officially rehabilitated on March 19, 1990, after I wrote to the Chairman of the Kazakhstan Supreme Court. I explained my peaceful role in the events and was invited to a meeting of the Supreme Court. I spoke there and received the official rehabilitation paper.

According to Kozhakhmetov, 34 "December" prisoners have been rehabilitated so far. He thinks that this is due in large part to the work of the Shakhnov Commission and its documentation.

Kazakh lawyer Amanzhol Malibayev, however, felt that the formal process of legal rehabilitation was only beginning:

By early 1989, public opinion had changed and people started demanding the release of the imprisoned protestors. One reason for this changed attitude was that they saw that people were demonstrating all over the USSR.

Although most political prisoners have been released, they are still considered guilty since they have not been rehabilitated. The process of rehabilitation is beginning only now.

Press Coverage of the Disturbances

Soviet News Reports

On the evening of December 18, TASS announced that nationalist riots had occurred in Alma-Ata in connection with the election of a Russian by the Kazakhstan Central Committee -- directed by Moscow -- as First Party Secretary of the republic. Western journalists were denied permission to go to Kazakhstan after the disorders. As a result, Western news was almost entirely dependent on Soviet reports for information about the December 1986 events.

The official Soviet media also carried extensive reports about Politburo member Mikhail Solomentsev's peripatetic visit to Alma-Ata from December 18 until December 22 -- without making a connection between the disorders and Solomentsev's arrival. In addition to TASS, official information on the "December Days" was provided at a Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs press conference on December 19 and in a Novosti dispatch from Alma-Ata from its Kazakhstan correspondent, Valery Novikov. (Although Novikov filed his eye-witness account -- which followed canonical Soviet lines on the events -- on December 17, it took five days for Novosti to run it.)

Soviet press articles on the "mass disorders" in Alma-Ata in December 1986 followed a similar pattern, portraying the "rioters" as drunken hooligans who wanted to destroy the ethnic harmony which reigned in Kazakhstan. The demonstrators were also often shown as spoiled "golden youth" who were upset at losing the privileges they had enjoyed under corrupt former Party boss, Dinmukhamed Kunaev.

The following excerpts, from an article by a well known Kazakh author, Anuar Alimzhanov, (*Literaturnaya Gazeta* January 1, 1987) are fairly typical of most Soviet press treatment of the Alma-Ata events. The initial protesters are portrayed as youths misled by deceitful people, later joined by hooligans and drunkards, and, finally, by "wild rowdies." Although a political dimension to the protest is recognized, it is contrasted to the will of the "vast majority" of the republic.

It all started the morning after a regular plenum of the ... Kazakhstan Central Committee (whose) resolutions were received as well-founded and rightful by the vast majority of the republic's Communists and working people.

Nonetheless, some people managed, through persuasion, deception and threats, to bring inexperienced, politically illiterate young people out onto the streets and squares ...

Hooligans, drunkards, and other anti-social individuals joined the crowd. Wild rowdies, armed with metal rods, sticks and stones, beat up and insulted citizens, overturned cars and set fire to them and broke the glass in stores, hostels and other public buildings.

The actions of the militia are only shown in a positive light: "In a difficult situation, workers from the law enforcement bodies displayed courage and restraint. They did not yield to provocation, although they were subjected to attacks. Militia men and detachments of the volunteer people's militia put a stop to the chaos."

Setting one nationality off against another is held to be the primary motive for unnamed elements which manipulated the protesters: "(Y)ou become ever more clearly aware that a provocative attempt was made to engender alienation between people and between nations."

Soviet press reports, including Alimzhanov's article, presented the stereotypical view of friendship among nationalities -- with particular stress on the positive role of "the Elder Brother" Russia - inside the USSR.

After lengthy and often florid passages on Kazakhstan's voluntary incorporation into the Soviet Union and its flourishing therein, on his republic's role as receiver of exiles -- carefully limiting his comments to tsarist days -- Alimzhanov puts the question: "Where is the source of the evil (of the December 1986 events?)" He blames the "stagnation" that reigned supreme in Kazakhstan for many years under the leadership of Kunaev whose personality cult he deplors.

Six months after the "December Days," Bess Brown of Radio Liberty Research noted that little specific information had appeared in the Soviet press on the "December events," including data on key issues such as the number of casualties:

(T)here has been relatively little published material (in the Soviet press) that has concentrated on the riots themselves. Various official Soviet sources have given conflicting figures for the number of casualties ... (T)here seems to have been little interest in providing a definitive version of exactly what happened in the capital of Kazakhstan on December 17 and 18 last year ... (D)espite ... a policy of glasnost in the press of Kazakhstan, it is still not clear how many people were injured and how many were arrested.

Kazakhstan Press

Initially, the Kazakhstan press presented an equally stereotyped view of the "December Days" as did the central Moscow media. By late 1987, however, analysts noted that the main newspaper in Kazakhstan, Kazakhstanskaya Pravda, had undergone a radical change for the better -- it had become very informative about life in the republic. It had even initiated a dialogue between the people and the paper which directly addressed readers' concerns.

As recently as May 1990, however, when members of the nationalist group "Zholotksan" held a fast in Alma-Ata to gain the release of the remaining "December" prisoners, the news was censored. Amanzhol Malibayev told Helsinki Watch:

(A)lthough there were a lot of journalists around, no articles appeared. Apparently, Abdilin, Vice Chairman of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet, ordered the newspapers to delay printing news about the fasts. Only after five days were there a few lines in the newspapers -- even though on the third day the hunger strikers were already negotiating with the local government.

Western News Reports

Western reporters were not allowed in Kazakhstan until two months after the disorders -- in mid-February, 1987. By that time, it was difficult to talk to those who were most directly involved in the December events. They were either in prison or were fearful to talk to Westerners.

First Western reports on the Alma-Ata disturbances, such as Bill Keller's article in the New York Times (December 20, 1986), "Soviet Says Rioting Involved Hundreds of Students," tracked some of the official Soviet coverage:

The initial (Soviet) reports gave no indication of the scale of the unrest, but mentioned that automobiles and a food store had been set on fire. A French reporter who reached the local party newspaper by telephone today was told that deaths and injuries had occurred during the disturbances. The report could not be confirmed.

In trying to get another perspective on this event, Keller turned to dissident Marxist historian Roy Medvedev who gave this view:

(T)he unusually frank report of [the fact of] the rioting may have been an excuse to begin a more extensive crackdown that would break up political cronyism among ethnic Kazakhs and send a warning to ethnic minorities in other republics.

"Soviet Rioters Got Vodka, Drugs, Witnesses Report" was the eye-catching title to a Washington Post article by Gary Lee on December 23, 1986. Lee contacted local sources who showed that the December 1986 events cast a long cold shadow on "dozens" of local Party officials' careers:

According to reports circulating in Kazakhstan, a post-riot visit to the area by the ruling Politburo's member in charge of Communist Party control (Mikhail Solomentsev) resulted in the arrest of dozens of local party officials as well as student demonstrators, Soviet sources from Alma Ata said.

Lee was also told that the protesters had been "encouraged" by stimulants:

The distribution of drugs and leaflets and the arrests of (local) party officials could not be confirmed by authorities in the Soviet capital. The information came from reliable Soviet sources from Alma-Ata who traveled to Moscow after the riots.

Lee concluded that the December demonstrations probably had support within the local Party apparatus:

The earmarks of local organization, coupled with the arrest of Kazakh Party officials, suggest that the decision to replace the 74-year-old Kunaev with Gennadi Kolbin, a 59-year-old Russian, was opposed within the local party bureaucracy.

He also pointed to the broader significance of the December days not only for Kazakhstan, but also for the Gorbachev political reform program. According to Lee, it represented the biggest display of nationalism-turned-to-violence under Gorbachev; but it also marked one of the last stands of the Brezhnevite old-guard:

The demonstrations marked the first time that opposition to an initiative of the new Soviet leadership has bubbled over into violence.

Since Kunaev is the last of the old guard in the ruling Politburo and was a close ally of former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev [who served in Kazakhstan in the 1950's] the

clash in Alma-Ata is viewed by Western analysts here as a response of the old guard to changes wrought by the new Soviet leadership, as well as a show of nationalism.

The impact of the Soviet press on Western reporting is seen in Celestine Bohlen's article in the Washington Post on January 11, 1987. Entitled "Soviet Press Details Kazakhstan Riot," it is based on a report in Komsomolskaya Pravda, the official Soviet youth newspaper. The Post article, citing the Soviet newspaper, noted "the riots were instigated by corrupt nationalists -- labeled "pogrom makers" -- after a meeting of the Kazakh Party Central Committee on December 16." It was at this meeting that Kunaev was replaced by Kolbin -- a fact which the Soviet article did not mention.

Soviet press reports stressed that the demonstrators were from influential families. Komsomolskaya Pravda noted that this meeting signalled the end of the easy life for "those who had good family connections ... bribe takers and ordinary scoundrels."

In analyzing Soviet press coverage of the December 1986 events, Bohlen also noted:

Since the riot two weeks ago, the official Soviet press gradually has been building a case against Kazakhstan's "old guard," which it says fomented the riots by manipulating the latent nationalism of the students.

It was not until mid-February 1987 that 12 Western journalists were finally allowed to go to Alma-Ata where they began to get a detailed view of the "December Days." According to an AP story (February 20, 1987) in the Los Angeles Times, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who was then Chairman of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet, provided the first well-rounded report on the event and gave more detailed information on casualties:

Nazarbayev told a group of visiting journalists that a "maximum of 3,000 people" took part, with two deaths and 200 injuries requiring medical treatment. Soviet officials and the government-controlled press earlier said that only "several hundred" demonstrators gathered in the city's main square.

The AP reporter noted in the Los Angeles Times, however, that the Soviet press was still covering up statistics on casualties:

One month after the riots, the Soviet press reported a single death, and earlier accounts of injuries did not specify the number...

The Tass news agency, in a report on Nazarbayev's meeting with the foreign journalists, did not mention injuries from the rioting.

Nazarbayev was also the first Soviet official to admit that the protesters had "voiced legitimate concerns, including food shortages and the housing problem in Alma-Ata." Here too, Tass distorted Nazarbayev's comments, according to the AP story:

Tass said Nazarbayev blamed the unrest on "very young people" who were concerned with the inadequacy of social services.

The Kazakhstan leader, according to the AP report, also broke new ground in acknowledging that

nationalist tensions had played a role in the disturbances:

Soviet press accounts played down the importance of the nationalities issue, blamed the riots instead on "hooligans and parasites" and implied that Kunaev cronies helped instigate them.

Nazarbayev, noting that most of the demonstrators were ethnic Kazakh students, said, "They did not say they were against Kolbin, and they did not say "We are for Kunaev.""

The policy of closing the vast majority of the land surface of the Soviet Union to foreigners, including journalists, is a major reason why Western reporting on so much of the USSR is so limited. The Soviet government's long-standing policy of denying permission for foreign reporters to travel in most of Soviet territory flies in the face of glasnost.

Investigations

In Kazakhstan, there have been two main investigations of the December 1986 demonstrations: an official commission, headed by People's Deputy Mukhtar Shakhanov, and a citizens' group, known as "Zholtoksan" (December).

Official Investigation: the "Shakhanov Commission"

In a June 1989 speech before the first All-Union Congress of People's Deputies, Deputy Mukhtar Shakhanov said that Kazakhstan Deputies were being flooded with telegrams and letters requesting an official investigation of the Alma-Ata protests in December 1986. According to Shakhanov, these people were convinced that the truth had never been fully revealed, particularly about the number of casualties. Official investigations into the killing of twenty peaceful demonstrators in Georgia in April 1989 apparently spurred efforts to organize an official examination of the Alma-Ata events of December 1986.

Partly in response to Shakhanov's plea, on June 26, 1989, the Presidium of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet established a commission to "bring full *glasnost*" to the events of December 1986. Significantly, the formation of this commission was one of the first major initiatives of Nursultan Nazarbayev, the First Party Secretary of Kazakhstan, who had replaced Gennadi Kolbin in that post shortly before.

Most of the new commission members were well-known official personalities in Kazakhstan; many were Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet Deputies. The commission was chaired by Kadyr Murzaliev, an establishment poet and member of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet Presidium; the deputy chairman was Boris Isaev, chairman of the republican People's Control Commission; the secretary was the head of the Kazakhstan State University Law Faculty. Other members included the editors of the republic Russian-language and Kazakh-language dailies; the ministers of health, justice and education; the chairman of the State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting; the second secretary of the republic Komsomol; a trade union official; a factory director; a symbolic worker; and the Russian writer D.F. Snegin.

The commission was authorized to examine all relevant documents in the republic State Prosecutor's office, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the KGB, and the Supreme Court and to assemble groups of experts to assist in the investigation.

On July 19, Shakhanov pressed for the inclusion of People's Deputies from other republics on the commission, arguing that commission members drawn solely from the republic could not be objective. Shakhanov later told the official Kazakhstan News Agency that he had been supported by the Inter-Regional Deputies Group and that he had also discussed his plan with Nazarbayev and Gorbachev. Rather than include Deputies from outside Kazakhstan on the commission, seven People's Deputies from Kazakhstan were included, and Shakhanov was appointed Co-chairman.

Murzaliev, the other Co-chairman, reported on the first phase of the Commission's work to the Kazakhstan press agency. In September 1989, he explained that the Commission needed more time to complete its work in a quiet and careful manner due to the complex social situation which underlay the protests. He was able to report, however, that Russians had taken part in the demonstrations, thus undercutting the July 1987 Central Committee designation of the December 1986 events as "a manifestation of Kazakh nationalism." Murzaliev also indicated that he was not happy with the wholesale expulsions of university and institute students on charges of involvement in the disturbances.

Shakhanov's activities on the Commission were causing political difficulties, however, according to Soviet press reports. Shakhanov, rather than relying on a few select experts, had empowered over 200

former lawyers and activists to demand relevant information from any organization in Kazakhstan. According to *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (#51, 1989), Shakhanov's aim was to show more casualties than had been officially recognized.

According to Kaldybai Abenov, a founding member of "Zholtoksan," in June and July 1989, some 200 people were involved in the Commission. In August and September, they began writing letters to the government, and in October and November, they began to get some responses from the government. On November 1, for example, General Yazov gave them permission to have access to the military archives.

In mid-November, Shakhanov delivered a report on behalf of the Commission to a Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet session.⁶ This report, according to *Izvestiya* (November 15, 1989), led to "heated polemics" which were deemed too incendiary even to summarize in *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*. As a result, the Commission was dissolved by the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet and a much smaller working group -- which presumably has lower official status than a commission -- was set up. (Appendix B attached to this report is an English-language translation of a *samizdat* protest at the dissolution of the Commission.)

The working group was to oversee fulfillment of a Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet resolution. A key point in the resolution was a request to the Central Committee to delete from its 1987 resolution the characterization of the Alma-Ata events as a "manifestation of Kazakh nationalism." The Supreme Soviet resolution also called upon republic law-enforcement agencies and other organizations to examine grievances arising from the 1986 events. The Presidium of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet was asked to give timely consideration to appeals for clemency.

An Interview with Deputy Shakhanov

During an extensive interview with Helsinki Watch on May 22, 1990, Deputy Shakhanov described his hopes for the working group that he heads. He described why he thought its work was so important:

You have long had democracy. It is just coming into fashion here. But if one is honest, one must stop talking around the December events.

In this effort, very important people supported us: Sakharov, Evtushenko, Aitmatov, and others. We demand *glasnost* and the truth.

He maintained that the aim of his group is to name specific individuals who were at fault in 1986, so as to move away from the notion that a whole nationality was to blame:

Far from trying to set one Kazakh against another, the purpose of the commission is to unify the Kazakhs. After all, the fault does not lie with the people as a whole, but rather with some individuals.

⁶ A translation of the unpublished findings of the commission, printed in *samizdat*, appears as Appendix A of this report.

Shakhanov told Helsinki Watch that, despite its official nature, his group has had no access to official information on deaths, but that three days ago they had "gotten indications" they would be given such access. He said:

So far, we have had no access to the records of deaths. But three days ago, we got indications that we will have access to all the official records. The use of force by the government was excessive.

Shakhanov also told Helsinki Watch that he had received death threats due to his activities and showed the Helsinki Watch representative an anonymous paste-up letter. "KGB workers have tried to compromise the Commission and its members," he said. "I wrote to KGB chief Kryuchkov and complained."

Despite difficulties, Shakhanov said his group hoped to finish its work and publish a "complex" report on June 17, 1990:

On June 17, we will report on the findings of the commission. Recently, the president of our republic gave an order to Party organizations to help the commission. The report will be difficult and complex. Some high officials have pitted people against each other. The truth will make people calm down.

Despite Deputy Shakhanov's hopes, Helsinki Watch has learned from informal sources that the "Shakhanov Commission" was not allowed to publish the report on its findings on June 17. When a Helsinki Watch representative recently asked President Nazarbayev whether the "Shakhanov Commission" report had appeared on June 17, he said that he thought that it had, but wasn't sure. This additional delay in publishing these findings will likely result in further undermining public confidence in the government and Party leadership in Kazakhstan.

An Unofficial Investigation: "Zholtoksan" (December)

"Zholtoksan" was organized in May 1989 and became actively involved in its work before the official "Shakhanov Commission" did. According to its founder, Amanzhol Malibayev, the group was created by those who had been sentenced for their role in the December 1986 events, together with relatives, friends and sympathizers. The total "Zholtoksan" membership is unknown. "Zholtoksan" was officially registered with the Kazakhstan authorities on March 29, 1990.

Kaldybai Abenov, a veteran member of "Zholtoksan," described the origins of the organization:

In March 1989, I was reading a scenario on the December 1986 events, called "Allahyar." The first variant of the script showed all the students as criminals. I refused to use this script ...

We searched for eyewitnesses ... We went to Deputy Shakhanov who was creating an investigatory commission, and suggested including someone who had been imprisoned due to these events. They refused.

We formed our own group at Kazakh Film Studios, in room 250. On May 20, 1989, we created "Zholtoksan" at the Kazakh Film Studios.

According to Kazakh lawyer and assistant to Deputy Shakhanov, Sarsenbai Sultanov, the purpose of "Zholtoksan" was to investigate the political roots of the December 1986 events:

"Zholtoksan" was founded in May 1989 to show that the December 1986 demonstrations were political, not nationalist, and to punish those who had conducted the military suppression of the demonstrations. It has not been completely successful in meeting its goals. As for punishment, for example, no one has been punished.

December 17 -- An Official Day of Mourning?

"Zholtoksan" wants December 17 to be named an official day of mourning for the victims of the December events. Kaldybai Abenov described the painstaking efforts of "Zholtoksan" to achieve that goal and the eventual partial grudging agreement of the local officials:

On December 9, 1989, "Zholtoksan" called for a Day of Mourning for the victims of 1986 and appealed to Kazakh intellectuals, but only Suleimenov and Shakhanov supported us.

On December 10, at 9 a.m., City Committee members, Baikenov, Sargenov and Mayor Nurkadilov tried to convince us not to go on the square on December 17. At about 3 p.m. we met with the mayor and the Third Secretary for Ideology, Dzhanibekov. We then drew up an exact program for the day, scaring the authorities.

On December 11, we met again with the City Committee, the Executive Committee and the Central Committee. We were promised meetings with Nazarbayev only after December 17.

On December 12, we were told we could hold a public program of commemoration on December 13, but it had to be indoors in the Conference Hall at the Medical Institute.

On December 13, we managed to get a big crowd of 5,000 in the big hall. We were promised we could run our own meeting, but Sarsenov, the Ideology Secretary, ran our meeting. He called on the MVD, the Procuracy, the KGB, local army commanders -- but at least it was the first public discussion of the December 1986 events. All these officials spoke, only accusing the demonstrators. But people also spoke from the floor, telling their stories. People still wanted to go out on the streets on December 17 to commemorate the events.

On December 14, we went around to all the offices; Shakhanov was due to arrive in Alma-Ata the next day, along with Karamanov, Chairman of the Kazakhstan Council of Ministers. At the mayor's office, they agreed we could hold a demonstration, but only on December 15. They also agreed to the holding of six meetings in six locations at various Alma-Ata institutes. Flowers were laid in the square in memory of the victims.

Hunger strikes

"Zholtoksan" activists mounted a hunger strike campaign in January 1990 and in May 1990 to bring about the release of the remaining "December" prisoners. According to Abenov:

On January 2, 1990, a picket was held outside the KazSSR KGB building at 15:00 hours. The women announced they were starting their fast to press for the release of the remaining "December" prisoners. One woman, Uvakova, fasted for her husband's release, and Nina Fokina fasted all day. Sixty of us joined them in front of the KGB building. We demanded a meeting with Nazarbayev. We wanted to talk to officials, but they refused to come out. Every ten minutes, a junior assistant came out to ask us to come into the building.

On January 3, 1990, we again met in front of the KGB building. Sagdiev came out to tell us that Uvakov was released.

On January 10, 1990, We met from 16:00 until 20:00 with KazSSR First Party Secretary Nazarbayev. He agreed to all our demands: to remove the characterization of the December 1986 events as "Kazakh nationalism," to release the four remaining political prisoners, and within three months to punish those guilty of repression in connection with December 1986.

On January 12, 1990, officials agreed to a mass meeting, but only in a closed hall.

The first "Zholtoksan" fast gained the release of two of the four remaining "December" prisoner cases. Kazakhstan officials promised to "look into" the other two cases, but did not resolve them.

As a result, "Zholtoksan" activists held another fast in May, 1990 -- this time unsuccessful -- to gain the release of the last two "December" prisoners. According to Abenov:

This fast, conducted by four activists, lasted four days and nights. We tried to get the remaining two prisoners, Kuzembayev and Taidzhumaev, released.

Further Developments

In December 1989, "Zholtoksan" joined eleven other groups in a powerful samizdat protest at continuing obstacles to investigation of the "December events." This appeal called for more investigation of this tragedy; it was signed by 25,000 people. [See Appendix C for a complete text of this appeal.]

Subsequent Disturbances in Kazakhstan

New episodes of violent protest, although on a much more minor scale, have occurred in Kazakhstan during the past two years. The central Soviet media seems to have reported these later instances of civil unrest more accurately and critically than it did the "December events" in 1986, often relying on the official reports of the Ministry of Internal Affairs spokesmen.

June 1989

Komsomolskaya Pravda, the official Soviet youth newspaper, broke the story on riots in western Kazakhstan in June 1989. With a critical tone more forthright than found in any reporting in 1986, Komsomolskaya Pravda noted that sending security troops to restore order in troubled areas would not settle pressing unsolved social problems. The youth newspaper commented that unemployment among young people on the Mangyshlak peninsula was high, observing that the region was "decades behind" the rest of the country in its social development due to the "diktat" of central ministries and bureaucrats.

This gloomy view of life in western Kazakhstan, especially for young people, was confirmed by a Russian resident of Fort Shevchenko, 150 kilometers from Novy Uzen. He told a Helsinki Watch representative, "not surprisingly," the city has been the site of "repeated disorders," due to horrible and expensive living conditions and all-pervasive corruption. He claimed, "You need connections to get anything from sausages to furniture."

The worst mass violence since December 1986 occurred in various small cities along the Caspian Sea in western Kazakhstan in June 1989. Izvestiya reported that the riots, involving mostly young people, began on June 17 in Novy Uzen, and resulted in three deaths. In an effort to maintain order, Soviet troops patrolled the city of 56,000. In addition to poor living standards and food rationing, the preferential treatment allegedly accorded to 20,000 oil workers brought in from the Caucasus reportedly led to the riots. In a detailed report on this incident, Izvestiya also disclosed that several hundred non-Kazakhs had been evacuated due to the violence.

Five days later, Pravda reported that the violence had spread to other Kazakhstan cities -- Yeraliev, Shepke, Fort Shevchenko, Mangyshlak and Kulsary -- along the Caspian Sea. The newspaper admitted that another person had died in the Novy Uzen violence, noting that Soviet authorities were hard-pressed to end the violence which began nine days ago. For example, Soviet Interior Ministry spokesman V. Sivushov was quoted by Pravda as saying that on June 24, 150 people who attacked the police station in Mangyshlak (51 were later arrested) had been dispersed by troops flown in by military helicopters.

Other disturbances followed. Sovetskaya Rossiya reported on October 3, 1989, that four Kazakh youths had been arrested for taking part in a street fight in Semipalatinsk on September 21, during which a Kazakh school boy was killed and two people died from injuries.

Pravda revealed that 140 people from the Transcaucasus, who had come to Yeraliev to work in the oil fields, had been evacuated at their request. Tass reported that the local authorities had "lost control" of the situation in Novy Uzen -- and that the local Party chief had just been replaced.

March 1990

Three flare-ups of violence occurred in Kazakhstan in March 1990. On March 8, on the Michurin State Farm in Chimkent oblast, there was an argument at the local Palace of Culture between Kazakh and Azerbaidzhani youths. The next day, a Palace of Culture in the city of Atbasar in Tselinograd oblast was the site of a youthful brawl between Kazakhs and men from the Caucasus.

Trouble flared again in Alma-Ata on March 10, 1990, in an inter-ethnic brawl involving up to 400 young men, between primarily Russian KGB border guard cadets and primarily Kazakh students at a local veterinary institute. Izvestiya reported on these three incidents of youthful violence in Kazakhstan. It also quoted the Kazakhstan Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs who noted that while the situation was now under control, "these hooligan escapades can have extremely unpleasant consequences." Some Western journalists seem to have had more success in reaching Soviet news sources in distant areas of the Soviet Union. Paul Quinn-Judge of the Christian Science Monitor (June 21, 1989) managed to contact the Novy Uzen Communist Party Committee. Quinn-Judge noted this source admitted "only with the greatest reluctance" that a curfew had been imposed in the city. If Soviet authorities were to admit foreign journalists to remote areas, it would improve news reports and lessen the feeling of isolation which plagues so many Soviet citizens.

Recommendations

Helsinki Watch calls on the Soviet government to:

- o set up an official commission, including officials from other republics and lawyers from other countries, to investigate the December 1986 disorders in Alma-Ata, particularly the issue of excessive use of force by the police and army;
- o publish widely the results of such an investigation, in line with the Soviet policy of glasnost, so as to minimize the possibility that such unfortunate incidents of violence may be repeated;
- o bring to criminal prosecution those officials and officers who are suspected of having used excessive force in the treatment of demonstrators, detainees, or arrestees;
- o train military and militia personnel engaged in the control of civil demonstrations to know and act on their international legal obligations under the Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials;
- o reform laws on demonstrations and crowd control, lessening reliance on untrained auxiliary police;
- o refrain from using extra-legal forces to arrest and interrogate Soviet citizens;
- o provide sick or wounded detainees or prisoners with the necessary medical treatment by trained medical personnel;
- o admit foreign and Soviet journalists to areas of civil unrest so that they will have access to local witnesses and officials; and
- o end the long-standing Soviet policy of forbidding foreigners to travel on most of Soviet territory.

Helsinki Watch calls on the government of Kazakhstan to:

- o allow the "Shakhanov Commission" full access to the materials and sources it needs, particularly to official archives on casualties, in order to provide it with the basis to produce an accurate and complete report on the December 1986 events;
- o publish in full the findings of the "Shakhanov Commission;"
- o conduct an official investigation into the death of the "December" prisoner, Kairat Ryskulbekov, and, if the investigation proves the death was not a suicide, bring to justice those who may be criminally liable;

- o investigate the criminal cases that have been brought against the other "December" prisoners, and bring to trial those officials who may bear criminal liability;
- o provide full rehabilitation, including reinstatement in places of education and employment, for those "December" prisoners who were unjustly prosecuted. Where justified, provide compensation;
- o repeal the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet Decree of November 14, 1989, "On Measures to Strengthen Socialist Law and Order in the Republic," which bans unsanctioned demonstrations, meetings and assemblies. This law is contrary to international law and to Helsinki commitments, and is not in the best interests of the peaceful development of the republic;
- o institute round table discussions, comprised of officials and citizen activists, to consider such issues as nationality tensions, particularly specific local incidents. The aim of such round table discussions, already instituted in some Soviet republics, should be to find ways to settle problems peacefully and fairly;
- o encourage the media in Kazakhstan to provide full coverage of events and issues, and discussions relating to human rights; and
- o publicize the Concluding Document of the Copenhagen Human Dimension Meeting, particularly its provisions on minorities.

Appendix A

Alma-Ata, November 14, 1989.

A Report
by Mukhtar Shakhanov
Commission Co-Chairman
USSR Supreme Soviet Member and USSR Peoples' Deputy

"On Commission Proceedings and on Further Clarification of the Circumstances of the December 1986 Events in Alma-Ata."

Respected Deputies!

This commission to examine the circumstances of the December 1986 events was created by a decree of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet Presidium on June 6, 1989 due to Deputies' inquiries and numerous voters' appeals.

The development of the process of perestroika, glasnost, the democratization of society, the awakening of people's consciousness -- in which the first congress of the USSR Peoples' Deputies played a significant role -- as well as the stormy events of our political life and the ethnic unrest in different regions of our country all contributed to the need to reconsider our usual ideas and assessments.

Only one year ago one could not even imagine a public statement in the press or from a podium about the December events; mere conversations about these events were considered a sign of unhealthy interest.

This event had more or less received a final evaluation and had been put in the archive of history. The return of [this event] shows that the process of perestroika and democratization has taken hold of the public life of Kazakhstan as well.

You should know from press reports that, at the insistence of the Peoples' Deputies, the commission has been enlarged. The commission has been functioning actively since the end of September 1989. At that time, a detailed program was developed and working groups of experts were created.

It is obvious that after such a short time, one cannot give comprehensive answers to all the questions posed and to formulate specific appraisals. Today one can speak only about some preliminary results. Therefore, I ask you not to consider my report as a final one, but as an account of ongoing commission work.

Up until now, the commission and its working groups have examined the statements of 210 citizens and more than 300 official documents, totaling about 3,000 pages. More than 300 citizens and officials were interviewed, including direct participants in the events, officials of judicial organs, the military, the Komsomol, the Party, Soviet officials, and the managers of enterprises and educational establishments.

Sixteen of 70 criminal cases were examined, as well as 201 cases of administrative law.

A group of Kazakhstan Ministry of Health experts submitted a preliminary conclusion.

Official responses to Deputies' inquiries were received from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Procuracy, the Supreme Court, the republic Ministry of Popular Education, as well as from the managers of various enterprises and institutions.

Only on November 1, 1989 we received an order from the Soviet Defense Ministry, T. Yazov, instructing the regional headquarters to assist the commission in getting access to the necessary documents.

Much has been written and said about the causes underlying the events of December 17-18, 1986. Conclusions and opinions on this issue can be found in the documents of leading party organs as well as in the statements of republic leaders. It is known that government organizations were involved in these events and their activities should be examined by the supreme organs of the republic government.

For two years the working people of Kazakhstan waited for perestroika but it did not come to the Republic. The 26th Party Congress passed without any visible changes in the political life of the republic.

The December 1986 events in Alma-Ata were caused by dissatisfaction of a certain part of the population, and not only the native population. Namely, it was the Fifth Plenum decision of the Kazakhstan Party's Central Committee on the leadership change that caused public protests. They protested the habitual practice of appointing republican party leadership from the Center, without considering the will of rank-and-file communists, ignoring worsening problems of inter-ethnic relations unresolved during the years of stagnation, language politics, the need for republic sovereignty, and the material and socio-psychological problems of the youth in Alma-Ata. All of this created a potentially explosive situation.

Some discontent among students was caused by the fact that prior to the December events, some Republican leaders, in examining the composition of the teaching staff and student body, became obsessed with filling percentage quotas based on nationality.

The plenum at which [Kolbin's appointment] was discussed lasted only 18 minutes; only three persons addressed the plenum: G. P. Razumovsky, G. V. Kolbin, and D. A. Kunaev. Such haste and lack of glasnost in deciding such a vitally important issue also heightened discontent.

The spontaneous rush of youth to the streets was mainly caused by the above-mentioned circumstances. Some "interested parties" were able to direct some politically unstable youth down the path of criminal activity. The situation was complicated by the lack of legislation to regulate the conduct of meetings and demonstrations.

These activities were not aimed against other nations, including the Russians. One cannot deny, however, that some participants revealed anti-Russian sentiments, just as there were some chauvinist Russians.

The isolated speeches, shouts and actions of some extremists which offended the national dignity of other peoples do not prove that inter-ethnic tensions existed.

We cannot afford a one-sided approach or bias in any direction. We must objectively analyze all the issues connected to the December events as a whole. That is why we should first consider the scale and the consequences of the events. The protest, which began in the morning of December 17 as a small and peaceful demonstration, became a mass disorder in which up to 5,000 students and young workers participated.

They refused to listen to the appeals of the Central Committee, the Supreme Soviet and the Council of Ministers, as well as to the officials of "law-enforcement" institutions. When the militia tried to push the demonstrators out of the square, the young people resisted and started to fight with the soldiers and the public order volunteers (*druzhiniki*) by using stones, sticks, and metal objects. The events rapidly deteriorated and got out of control.

In such conditions, in order to stabilize the situation, they used 7,618 servicemen from the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) organs, MVD troops, as well as students of military educational

institutions. The MVD troop units were transferred to Alma-Ata from Frunze, Tashkent, Chelyabinsk, Novosibirsk, Tbilisi, Ufa, and Sverdlovsk. Ten thousand public order volunteers were placed in the streets as well. As a result, according to official reports, two men died -- one an employee by the name of Savitsky of the Radiotele center, and a student of the energy institute named Spataev, who died at a hospital on December 23 due to severe brain trauma. The third man who died was a manager at an automobile garage by the name of Aristov. His name, however, was not mentioned in any official report, as not being related to the events. M. T. Abdykulov, who killed Aristov with a knife on December 19, 1986, was found guilty and sentenced to death for having committed a murder which was connected to the December events.

A participant of the events, a student of the Alma-Ata Architectural-Construction Institute, K. Ryskulbekov was sentenced to death. His sentence was later overturned and commuted to twenty years of imprisonment. On May 21, 1988, while being transferred to Ivdel, where he was to serve his term, Ryskulbekov committed suicide in Semipalatinsk.

It should be noted that in his farewell letter as well as in his pardon petition to the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet and in his appeal to the Kazakhstan Supreme Prosecutor, Ryskulbekov completely denied his guilt in the murder of citizen Savitsky. He also complained that incorrect investigative methods, lack of objectivity, and false evidence had been used, etc. Nevertheless, these deductions of Ryskulbekov's did not receive the attention they deserved. There was no court examination of the Ryskulbekov complaints and no conclusion was reached as to whether or not his complaints were justified or not. We believe that the Procuracies of the Kazakhstan republic and of the USSR should make public their conclusions: on the facts of Spataev's death and on the thoroughness of the investigation; after all, the killer was never found. In the Ryskulbekov case, there should also be a careful investigation of the facts of improper investigative methods described in his letters and in appeals from his relatives.

According to the reports of the city medical institutions on the December events, 1,233 people were registered with various traumas and injuries of varying severity. This figure represents 465 more than was mentioned in the official reports. Of these, 774 work for "law-enforcement" institutions, and 459 are civilians. If in the MVD medical facilities all the cases [of patients] were registered, then in the city hospitals far from all the cases were registered -- [the patients] themselves hid the real reason for their wounds and injuries. Of those who applied, 225 persons were hospitalized and 998 persons received outpatient treatment. There was a higher percentage of severe and medium wounds among civilians. The rate of severe wounds for civilians was 3.7% and for "law-enforcement" employees 0.5%. The most frequent injuries were: contusions, disabling wounds, cuts, broken bones, brain injuries, and injury in the chest and stomach areas.

Starting from December 1986, rumors surfaced and were spread all over the country and often repeated in the media and in the speeches of high officials. The rumors were that criminals, alcoholics, and drug addicts were the initiators of these events.

According to the Alma-Ata city and oblast [regional] medical institutions which specialize in narcotics, from December 17-19, no cases of alcoholism or drug addiction were registered. The city medical "drying out tanks" did not treat any drunks who had been on the square.

The KGB and the Central Asian Military District hospitals did not provide our commission with data on injuries.

The commission also does not have information on the work time lost due to temporary illness.

The MVD organs detained 2,401 persons for participation in the mass unrest. In addition, 5,324 persons were questioned in the procuracy and 850 by the KGB. Three hundred twenty-six cases were directed to Peoples' Courts which decided cases of administrative responsibility, 108 were fined and 3 were sentenced to the corrective labor camps. Of these cases, the commission managed to acquaint itself

with the case materials for 201 individuals.

Typically, all the convicted persons considered their detentions by the law-enforcement organs illegal. In each case, only a protocol or an official report drawn up by one militia man shows that [the defendant] committed the crime. Based on such materials, the courts did not have the legal right to order sentences for administrative punishments since the consideration of a person's guilt is based on the examination of only one protocol. This juridical procedure, as lawyers confirm, is not in accord with the Kazakhstan Republic Administrative Code.

The cases examined involved 99 people, of whom 82 persons were sentenced to prison, including 23 women and five minors.

At the present time, ten persons are still in confinement; the rest were freed for the following reasons: three persons were released because they had not committed crimes, despite initial protests from the Kazakhstan Prosecutor's office and the Soviet Supreme Court. Fourteen persons were pardoned by the Presidium of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet; seven were released after they finished their prison terms; 27 people received reduced sentences shortly before the end of their terms due to protests by the Supreme Court of Kazakhstan and the Prosecutor's Office. A. B. Uvakov is serving a three-year term in Magadan for his role in the December events. Since January 1989, he has often been told by the administration of the corrective labor colony to apply for a pardon. But A.B. Uvakov announced that he does not want to be branded a criminal and cannot exchange his honor for freedom. Instead, he insists on full rehabilitation.

In Alma-Ata, 319 persons were fired from their jobs for their participation in the unrest. 226 of these people left the city.

According to official reports, 182 persons were expelled from educational institutions but 136 of them were reinstated. Fifty-three were expelled from the Communist Party; 210 Party members were reprimanded; 758 people were expelled from the Komsomol and 1,104 members of the Komsomol were reprimanded.

The following questions naturally arise:

How could it happen that a small peaceful demonstration turned into mass unrest -- resulting in nine burned-out cars, 152 damaged automobiles, and 27 damaged buildings? The entire material damage was estimated at more than 302,000 rubles.

Why was there no dialogue between the Republic leaders and the demonstrators?

What stimulated illegal actions by the demonstrators and would it have been possible to prevent these actions without a show of force?

Did the authorities have a plan to stabilize the situation? If so, who developed this plan, who approved it and who was in charge of enforcing it?

These and other questions, as well as much testimony on the unjustified actions of the law-enforcement organs obtained by the commission, require careful and thorough study.

Even now, some leaders of the law-enforcement" institutions deny that shovels and police dogs were used. Many eyewitnesses testify to the contrary. For instance, S. Abdrakhmanov, a member of the Kazakhstan Communist Party Central Committee and former First Secretary of the Kazakhstan Komsomol Central Committee, wrote: "I myself and former Second Secretary of the Kazakhstan Komsomol Central Committee P. G. Nikitin were witnesses to scenes where soldiers were using shovels to beat the spines of people who were detained and were not resisting. I interfered and stopped the soldiers several times since these actions were seen by many and could cause new outbursts of violence."

Here is the text of a document signed by Colonel Ponomarev, Chief of the Military General Troop School of Alma-Ata, Marshal Konev School 104/OK on October 31, 1989:

1) School Personnel were enlisted from December 18-21, 1986, on the basis of a verbal

order from V. N. Lobov, Commander of the Military District. There were no written instructions.

2) 600 students, 83 officers and 15 ensigns participated. Total persons: 698 people.

3) Their equipment was: coats, hats, helmets, high boots, gloves, half-woolen cloths, belts, and shovels with covers.

During verbal questioning as to why the students of military schools were supplied with shovels, he answered, "It is standard field equipment." The response to the next logical question, "What trenches were the soldiers going to dig on an asphalt square?" the answer could be found in the medical report: "The injured demonstrators had wounds with deep cuts."

Remember that at the First Congress of People's Deputies, during a discussion of the Tbilisi tragedy, General Rodionov proved that sappers' shovels had not been used due to the lack of wounds caused by cutting or slicing.

Facts showing that police dogs were used against demonstrators were confirmed by R. Beisenov and S. Kusainov, teaching assistants at the Polytechnical Institute. About 10:00 p.m. on December 17, 1986 on Satbaev Street near the institute, they watched as soldiers with dogs attacked people. One worker at the Alma-Ata Komsomol committee, A. Tokumbaev, hid four girls who were being chased by the soldiers with dogs on the night of December 17.

Militia Major Molibogin, a manager of the dog kennel at the Alma-Ata Internal Affairs Administration also confirms that dogs were used. According to him, ten inspectors with dogs were brought [to the demonstration] on the orders of the management of the City Internal Affairs Executive Committee. The dogs' task was to block the entrances to the square and prevent people from getting in. The dogs were summoned several times and during one trip there, two dogs were killed.

Fire engines were also used to disperse the demonstrators. They were used from the very beginning of the events when a dialogue between the demonstrators and the republic leadership failed to have positive results. Colonel M. A. Abdilmanov, Chief of the Fire Department of the City Internal Affairs Administration, stated: "At 11:00 a.m. on December 17, 1986, I arrived at the square and the leadership of the Department of Internal Affairs was already there, including the Deputy Minister of the Kazakhstan Ministry of Internal Affairs, B.A. Koriakovtsev. At that time, columns of demonstrators were moving towards the square. I was given the command: "prepare the fire engines." About 6:00 p.m. they gave me another command: "Go to the Central Committee building. A meeting of the leadership, under the chairmanship of General-Colonel B. K. Elisov, First Deputy Minister of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs, was taking place. At this time he said that according to his calculations, six fire engines would be needed. Ten minutes later he said that ten would be needed. Later I received an order to prepare 20 fire engines. Then we started shooting water from those fire engines."

We also have many witness depositions about the fact that public order volunteers were seen preparing metal sticks, clubs and pieces of metal reinforcing bars to use against the demonstrators. All these weapons were made at some Alma-Ata enterprises.

All these above-mentioned facts prove that there were very serious violations of the law but all of these facts will, of course, be carefully verified.

There is a second set of questions to which the commission can respond:

1) The evaluation of the December events as an attack by nationalists, alcoholics and drug addicts does not correspond to reality. Today it is evident that the December events were a great tragedy and not only for the Kazakh people. This can be upheld by a large number of participants from opposite sides, from their methods, from the numbers of the injured, and from the scale of material and moral damage. The full depth and scale of this tragedy, its weighty consequences, will only be possible to envisage politically and philosophically.

- 2) The Commission considers it is a mistake to interpret the December events as evidence of Kazakh nationalism as it was stated in the CPSU Central Committee resolution "On the Work of the Kazakhstan Communist Party on International and Patriotic Education of the Working People." This interpretation is not well thought out, it is hasty, it does not have a scientific and political basis, and it is insulting to the whole Kazakh nation. In connection with this, the commission plans to appeal to the CPSU Central Committee to withdraw this unjust accusation. We believe that the CPSU Central Committee will find the courage to admit its mistake.
- 3) In the course of the December events, a sharp contradiction was revealed for the first time between an officially announced course of perestroika, the democratization of society and the creation of the legal foundations of government, and the inertia of the administrative-command system. This contradiction manifested itself in the initial directive to settle a major socio-political conflict by force.
- 4) The commission notes that the shock caused by the December events, despite the heavy burden of its consequences, could not disturb the centuries-old friendship among the nations which inhabit multi-national Kazakhstan. This was witnessed by the support which the representatives of all nations rendered to the commission.
- 5) The commission does not have facts which could confirm the conclusion that groups of people or single individuals were initiators or organizers of the events. It is known that such people were not found either by the Procurator's Office or by the KGB. However, the commission also does not have facts which could prove the spontaneous character of the events.
- 6) The rumors about numerous deaths, the facts of which were supposedly hidden by "law-upholding" organs, could not be confirmed by documentation. The signals which the commission has obtained are being particularly carefully examined.
- 7) The commission has received and is still receiving many requests and complaints about violations of socialist law and human rights by the KGB, the militia, the "law-enforcement" and investigative organs, and the courts. These complaints are being carefully verified and it would be premature to draw a final conclusion on them at this time.

We need to objectively investigate the materials presently in the commission's possession along with those which it will receive in the future. We consider it necessary to continue our work in this direction and bring it to its logical conclusion.

Appendix B

"An Analysis of the Dissolution

of the Shakhanov Committee"

by

Senior Secretary M. Imanbaev of the Kazakhstan
Citizens' Human Rights Committee

(Alma-Ata, after November 14, 1989)

Although it contradicted the views of the Commission members, the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet, in a decree of November 14, 1989 and under pressure from the republic party leadership, dissolved the commission which investigated the December 1986 events in Alma-Ata although the commission had not finished its work.

We are glad that in the second paragraph of its decree, the Supreme Soviet decided to ask the CPSU Central Committee to examine removing the words, "a manifestation of Kazakh nationalism" from its assessment of the events. It proves that from the very beginning, the issue of the "December events" was not raised in vain and it was necessary to fight in order to remove an unjustified label from the Kazakh people.

On the other hand, the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet, in the fourth paragraph of its decree, assigned the Kazakh prosecutor, the Supreme Court, the MVD, the KGB, the Kazakhstan Ministry of Education, and the heads of various enterprises and institutions to investigate the complaints and the appeals -- and it was they who issued reprisals against the demonstrators.

As the proverb says, "They punished a pike by throwing it into the river." In order to preserve a pretense of objectivity and justice, they created a working group of seven persons to ensure the fulfillment of this decree, while nullifying the authority of the previous commission.

A certain circle of people in the higher echelons of power in the republic did not permit the commission to bring its work to its logical conclusion -- recognizing that errors had been made. The reasons are now clear: Most of those who were then in leading positions are now sitting safely in their chairs or have even moved higher. People know about this and their discontent is growing. Only the truth and a public assessment of the events would quell their discontent. The lies and half-truths which appear in the republic press only irritate the population.

Therefore, proceeding from what has been said, in the interest of the Kazakh population, we urge that a proposal be put forward at the Second Congress of the USSR Peoples' Deputies to create an independent commission from among the USSR Peoples' Deputies -- from representatives of various republics.

Appendix C

Alma-Ata, December 22, 1989

To: USSR Supreme Soviet
CPSU Central Committee
Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet
Kazakhstan Council of Ministers
Kazakhstan Communist Party Central Committee

To all the citizens of the republic and the country!

A Public Appeal
from the
Representatives of 12 "Informal" Groups

Signed by
25,000 residents of Kazakhstan

1962 -- Novocherkassk (Ed. -- A huge peaceful workers' protest during which Soviet troops shot hundreds of demonstrators.)
[1986] -- Alma-Ata

1989 -- Tbilisi. (Ed. -- A peaceful protest in April 1989 during which 20 demonstrators were killed by troops.)

This tragic chain of events goes down in history as the disgrace of deformed socialism.

Three years have passed since the December events in Alma-Ata. For three years the truth about this tragedy has been hidden. Only at the First Congress of the Peoples' Deputies to the USSR, the voices of the USSR People's Deputies Chingiz Aitmatov, Mukhtar Shakhonov and Olzhas Suleimanov have broken this conspiracy of silence.

A request was made to create an independent commission composed of USSR People's Deputies to investigate the events. In order to block its creation, at the end of June 1989, a commission of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet was hastily established. It is well known that people did not trust this commission because it was composed of the very officials who were interested in hiding the truth from the people.

An additional request for the 92 members of the USSR Supreme Soviet to create an independent deputies' commission on the "December events" was also ignored. Later, a compromise was reached: the existing commission of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet was enlarged to include eight People's Deputies from Kazakhstan.

The Kazakhstan Citizens' Human Rights Committee, which was established to support this deputies' commission, took part in the development of the program and in creating eight working experts'

groups, and passed all the documents which it possessed on to the commission.

After one month, from October 10 until November 13, 1989, the specialists in the experts' groups studied a great many declarations, documents and certificates, as well as 201 administrative cases and 16 of 70 criminal cases and questioned more than 500 citizens and officials.

In the process of verification, gross violations of socialist law by the internal troop units (MVD) and law enforcement organs were exposed. In connection with the events, 2,401 persons were detained, 5,324 were questioned by the Procuracy and 850 by the KGB. According to incomplete data of the city medical institutions, there were 1,233 persons with bodily injuries and traumas of differing degrees. It should be noted that the percentage of those with injuries was 7.4 times higher than among the members of the law enforcement organs. Seven thousand six hundred and eighteen MVD workers and special military units from Ufa, Sverdlovsk, Frunze, Tashkent, Novosibirsk, Chelyabinsk, and Tbilisi were used. Ten thousand public order volunteers were armed with pieces of metal supplied by local factories.

In order to suppress the mass action of youth, they applied rubber truncheons, sappers' shovels, fire engines, powerful search lights and police dogs. Evidence of inhumane treatment of women and teenagers was revealed, as well as the beating of those who were detained or under investigation, and other violations of criminal and legal procedures.

In pursuit of the non-existent phenomenon of "Kazakh nationalism," they started a repression campaign which led to friction between nations that had lived in peace and friendship for centuries. Two hundred and sixty-three people were expelled or reprimanded from the Communist Party alone, and 1,862 members of the Komsomol were expelled or reprimanded. Many people were fired, deprived of prizes, removed from waiting lists for housing, evicted from hostels and expelled from the city. These and other facts were hidden from the public, although officially glasnost had been declared.

All the official reports assessed the "December events" as a "hostile attack of nationalist extremists, hooligans, alcoholics and drug addicts." But the data of the Kazakhstan Health Ministry showed that at that time, there were no registered cases of alcohol or drug addiction among those detained. It is clear that certain circles wanted to accuse the protest participants of using alcohol or drugs in order to make it look like their political demands were actually criminal felonies.

It began as a peaceful political demonstration by young people to protest the decision of the Fifth Plenum of the Kazakhstan Communist Party Central Committee. This plenum, in line with Communist Party Central Committee directives, took 18 minutes to appoint G.V. Kolbin, an official unknown in Kazakhstan, as First Secretary of the Republic Central Committee.

The Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet Commission established that at first the actions [in the "December events"] were not directed against any nation in particular. One cannot consider the speeches and shouts of some extremists as showing the demonstrators' prevailing mood or even more of opposing national groups.

The Fifth Plenum decision served as a pretext for peaceful activity by socially unsettled youth who felt very deeply about all the unsolved nationalities policy problems.

The conversion of a peaceful demonstration into mass unrest was provoked by the republic leadership and the law enforcement organs which began to threaten and accuse them.

The events widened to include Alma-Ata, Karaganda as well as Dzezkazgan, Aktyubinsk, Mangyshlak, East-Kazakhstan, Taldy-Kurgan, Tselinograd, and other oblasts. According to official data, for events in Alma-Ata alone, 99 persons were sentenced including 33 women and five minors. Among those detained and sentenced were 13 recidivists.

Today it is time to name the specific people who were responsible for the cruel suppression of the demonstration. They were: M.S. Solomentsev, a former member of the Politburo of the Communist Party Central Committee; G.V. Kolbin, former First Secretary of the Kazakhstan Communist Party

Central Committee; Z.K. Kamalidenov, former Secretary of the Kazakhstan Communist Party Central Committee; General-Colonel V.N. Lobov, former Commander of the Central Asian Military District; General-Colonel B.K. Elisov, First Soviet Deputy Internal Affairs Minister; and A.T. Kniazev, Minister of Kazakhstan Internal Affairs.

The persons responsible for the mass persecutions and punishments which followed the events are: G.B. Elemisov, Kazakhstan Procurator; T.K. Aitmukhambetov, Supreme Court Chairman; V.M. Miroshnik, KGB Chairman; Dospolov, Kazakhstan Justice Minister.

The above-mentioned persons in leadership positions promoted the dissemination of disinformation in the mass media about the real reason behind the "December events." This provided the stimulus for a real outburst of inter-ethnic tensions, reflected in the accusation of the Kazakh nation in the well-known Communist Party Central Committee decree, "On the Manifestation of Kazakh Nationalism."

Only on November 14, 1989, under public pressure, the 15th session of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet unanimously recognized that this formulation had been a mistake.

The Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet, by curtailing the commission's work, has broken its word to the people of the republic. Everything possible was done to bury the truth about the "December events."

At a public meeting in the Alma-Ata Medical Institute assembly hall, a demand was formulated on December 13, 1989, to dismiss the Kazakhstan Republic Prosecutor, Elemisov; the Kazakhstan Minister of Internal Affairs, Knyazev; the Supreme Court Chairman, Aitmukhambetov; the republic KGB chairman Miroshnik, as well as to determine the responsibility borne by V.I. Efimov, the Head of the Department on State and Law of the Kazakhstan Central Committee. We support this demand.

These people compromised themselves by their lack of respect for Soviet law and international human rights agreements, by allowing massive violations of socialist legality and by their intentional disinformation of public opinion. Their presence in the republic leadership and in the higher echelons of power is inconsistent with the principles of legal democratic government.

Expressing such public opinion, we state the following demands:

1. Include in the agenda of the next plenums of the Central Committees of Kazakhstan and of the Soviet Communist Parties the issue of the removal of the insulting accusation of the Kazakh people in the official assessment of the events as a "manifestation of Kazakh nationalism." This was the formulation in the well-known decree of the Communist Party Central Committee. We also demand a public apology to the Kazakh people.

2. Create an independent commission of Deputies from the USSR Supreme Soviet.

3. Grant the working group the status of a Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet Commission and include public representatives and make public its activities.

4. Include in the working group independent lawyers-experts from other regions of the country and from abroad, as was done when similar events in Tbilisi were investigated.

Remove from the working group B. Isaev, Chairman of the Kazakhstan People's Control Commission, and other persons who compromised themselves by preventing the commission from effectively carrying out an objective investigation.

5. Under pressure from certain members of the former Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet Commission to investigate the "December events" as well as some from other officials, a special paragraph was included in the decree on the 15th session of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet which stated that rumors about a large number of victims were not confirmed. We would be very glad if these "rumors" were only rumors. We know, however, that the commission did not investigate a single instance in which it was informed of victims.

We demand, therefore, that the interrogation organs provide the working group with comprehensive assistance and not raise obstacles as it has done until now.

6. After the sudden curtailment of the work of the former commission, some members of the working group have experienced pressure from the law enforcement organs. We demand a stop to such illegal actions.

7. In order to avoid all possible misinterpretations of the work of the 15th session of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet, we demand:

a. The publication of the complete report on the "December events" by People's Deputy Shakhanov;

b. The publication of a verbatim record of the discussion on M. Shakhanov's report;

8. All persons responsible for the tragedy of the "December events" in 1986 should be named in the press and legal actions should be taken against them, regardless of their present positions.

9. Release from confinement and extend rehabilitation to those who were sentenced due to the "December events."

10. Strike out those paragraphs in the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet Decree of November 14, 1989: "On Measures to Strengthen Socialist Law and Order in the Republic" which ban unsanctioned demonstrations, meetings and assemblies. This ban is contradictory to international law as well as to the process of building a legal society.

11. Designate a specific location in the central area of Alma-Ata as a regular place for meetings and assemblies.

Dear Citizens!

The "December events" of 1986 are not only a tragedy for the Kazakh people but also a source of pain for all the nationalities of our republic. As is known, it is to the advantage of certain officials and their ambitions to be balanced off against [our] fraternal peoples. Our duty is to cure this disease decisively and skillfully, not to drive it even further inside ourselves. The only medicine in this case is the whole truth. To tell the truth, as bitter as it may be, is the duty of every person, every internationalist-citizen.

Corrupt circles, however, inflaming inter-ethnic hostility, skillfully manipulating public opinion, discrediting and dishonoring people who told the truth about these events, block the way to revealing the truth. An ancient rule of the leaders is at work here: "Divide and Conquer!"

But the truth cannot be silenced. More than 25,000 people signed this appeal from republic and informal organizations.

We urge everyone to commit an act of civic courage and add your signatures to this appeal.

December 22, 1989

This appeal was signed on behalf of public and informal organizations of the republic by:

From the Kazakhstan Citizens' Human Rights Committee:

N. K. Fokina

From the Anti-Nuclear Public Movement "Nevada-Semipalatinsk":

M. M. Auezov

From the Public Committee on the Problems of the Aral and Balkhash Lakes and Ecology in Kazakhstan:

M. K. Tuebaev

From the informal society "Zholtoksan":

H. K. Kozhakhmetov

K. Abenov

From the Historic-Ethnographic Association "Zheriuk":

A. K. Atabekov

From the Scientific-Production Society "Zhelmaia":

B. Zhumadildin

From the Historic-Ethnographic Society "Kausar-Bulak":

B. Myrzakhmetov

From the Historic-Educational Club "Akikat":

A. Umataev

From the Ecology Union "Tabigat":

M. Eleusizov

From the society "Forum":

B. Aralbaev

From the Republican Student Council:

B. Taurbekov

From the Kazakhstan Voluntary Historic-Educational Society "Adilet":

M. K. Baidildaev