

U.S. Urges Fairness as Trial of Kazakh Opposition Leader Opens

August 16, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

An outspoken critic of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev went on trial on Thursday charged with attempting to overthrow the government, in a case the United States says will test the oil-producing former Soviet state's democratic progress.

Vladimir Kozlov, leader of the unregistered Alga! party, is accused of helping orchestrate dissent among oil workers in a region where deadly rioting on Dec. 16-17 shattered Kazakhstan's reputation for stability.

He denies the charges and, as his trial began in a packed courtroom, his supporters called for his release.

At least 15 people were killed in the town of Zhanaozen and a nearby village when police opened fire on protesters, unrest that followed months of protests by sacked oilmen and posed the most serious challenge to Nazarbayev in his more than two decades in charge of the Central Asian republic.

Robert Blake, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, said Kazakhstan had a "particular responsibility" to demonstrate reforms pledged as chair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in 2010.

"We hope that [the trial] is going to be conducted in a fair, impartial and open way," Blake told reporters in Almaty on the eve of the trial.

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