

Why Kazakhstan veterans of Afghan War are unhappy with the law “On veterans” to be adopted in their country, what should it contain in their opinion, and how they are going to achieve that. These are the things that were told to CABAR.asia by **Sharipbai Utegenov**, a chair of the Union of Veterans of Afghan War and local wars of Kazakhstan and a deputy chair of the Committee for Internationalist Soldiers Affairs of the council of the heads of CIS member state governments.

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CABAR.asia: On May 7, the president of Kazakhstan Kassym Zhomart-Tokayev signed the law “On veterans” adopted by the Senate of the parliament on April 30, which was expected by internationalist soldiers for many years. However, a few months ago you said this law was unacceptable for you. Why?

Sharipbai Utegenov: We raised the question on the need of adoption of the law “On veterans” in Kazakhstan and lobbied it for 20 years. Numerous commissions, working groups were created in the parliament, ministries, agencies, but every time the law was delayed. Finally, this year President Kassym Zhomart-Tokayev ordered to adopt it in honour of the 75th anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War.

We’ve expected this law for many years, but now we are not that happy now. Because its contents are inappropriate.

What do you mean?

In fact, there is nothing new in the law for the veterans of Afghan War. This law is totally unnecessary because it added neither status, nor benefits and special state assistance.

The decree No. 2247 dated April 28, 1995 of the president of Kazakhstan “On benefits and social protection of participants, disabled soldiers of the Great Patriotic War and eligible persons” equalled us to persons who have the same benefits and guarantees as the participants of the Great Patriotic War, as participants of military actions in the territory of other states. The word “participants” in the law was replaced by “veterans” and nothing more.

We understand how important it is for those who served in the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border, participants of the peacemaking operation in Iraq, etc. to get the official status of veterans of military actions. But Afghan war veterans have already had the official status.

Social support remains the same for us and it is not enough to let our veterans live decently. Until 1999, we had public utilities, fuel, medication supply, transportation benefits etc., but then they were replaced with special state benefit.

It's amount after enactment has not changed: it remained the same 6.19 monthly calculation indices (MCI). In money terms, the amount rose slightly due to the MCI (from April 1, 2020, 1 MCI is 2,778 tenge or 6.59 dollars, before that it was 2,651 tenge or 6.29 US dollars CIIA) 17,196 tenge (40.77 USD).

This amount cannot cover even half of utility services payment, not to speak of accommodation costs.

If we consider other benefits in detail, for example, priority housing, allocation of land plots, priority services at clinical outpatient organisations etc., they remained the same. Also, all other things remained the same.

So, in your opinion, they took the development of the draft law technically?

Yes. Moreover, I think the law was copy pasted from the same decree No. 2247. In addition to Afghan war veterans, participants of further actions were added to the veterans of military actions. The decree itself resembles the law on social protection of veterans of the Great Patriotic War.

On May 5, Vice Minister of Labour and Social Protection of People of Kazakhstan Yerlan Aukenov at the

briefing said that the law “On veterans” does not infringe on the status of Afghan war veterans.

“In their statements, Afghan war veterans wrote that the law ‘On veterans’ infringes on their rights. We’d like to say that this law does not infringe on anyone, all rights, benefits, allowance, aids that Afghan war veterans have remain the same,” Aukenov said (as cited on zonakz.net).

He noted that the main purpose of the law was to determine socially vulnerable categories of veterans, and to strengthen the measures of their social support. Thus, the document specifies five socially vulnerable categories of veterans:

1. Veterans of the Great Patriotic War;
2. Veterans of military actions in the territory of other states;
3. Veterans equalled to the veterans of the Great Patriotic War in benefits and guarantees;
4. Veterans of labour;
5. Other categories of people eligible under the law.

What provisions about the Afghan war veterans should the law contain, in your opinion?

At first, we wanted to have the uniform status of war veterans, not the status of participants of the Great Patriotic War or veterans of military actions. We wanted it because people shed blood anyway and deaths are the same in any war. Also, we should not be divided by categories – first or second category veterans. It was a war in Afghanistan with many casualties. Not to damage international relations, or create a reason for war indemnity, we stopped using this word.

Even if the status of military actions veterans remains, we’d like to see the increase in state special benefits up to the level of veterans of the Great Patriotic War (16 minimum one-time wages – 42,416 tenge (100 dollars)) in the law. By the time of collapse of the Soviet Union, there were almost half a million of such veterans, now Kazakhstan has one thousand.

This may sound cynical, but the money saved on veterans who die can be allocated to the Afghan war veterans. Moreover, there are few of Afghan war veterans in Kazakhstan: only 15 thousand out of 22 thousand.

Back in the 1990s, the country encountered a difficult situation and disorder. Pensions and wages were not paid, plants were closed. We did not insist on increase in benefits as we understood that everyone was suffering. We overcame these difficulties together with our people.

But now we declare ourselves as one of the most successive states, at least in the CIS. We are considered the leading state in Central Asia. I think, it can afford this measure, it would not be a burden on the budget. As a comparison, in Kyrgyzstan that is less developed Afghan war veterans get higher allowances.

Did you voice your position during the discussion of the law?

Every time working groups were created to develop a law on veterans, we took part in discussion, expressed our position, and made proposals. Representatives of our organization participated in the discussion of the latest version of the law. But they did not listen to our opinion earlier and do not listen to it now.

Obviously, they are in a hurry to pass the law in time to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War. They told us: let's pass it now as it is, and then we will finalise it, issue by-laws, if necessary, we will accept the amendments. But it will be a problem then. If the law itself was adopted for 20 years, amendments to it would be adopted for another 100 years. We do not live forever. We died more in peace than in Afghanistan.

Our position was that all benefits should have been prescribed in the law itself, and not postponed until later. But the drafters of the law did not take our interest into account. The interests of the Afghan war veterans.

So you are against the law "On veterans"?

I'd say we are indifferent to this law in this form. We cannot oppose and protest because other categories of veterans - participants of military actions on the Tajik-Afghan border and others - were looking forward to this law. We do not want to oppose ourselves to them, to block the law because the law concerns other categories. But as a person who protects and is responsible for the interests of participants and disabled people in the war in Afghanistan, I repeat, we are not satisfied with this law.

What are you going to do next?

We will fight further for amendments, increase in state special benefits, for the introduction of additional support measures at the level of local executive bodies. As a public organisation, we will continue this work.

However, as a social movement, we failed to improve our position: to increase benefits, obtain appropriate status, change the attitude of the state towards us. We have no influence

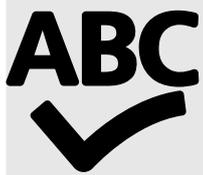
on the law-making process. That is why there have been talks that we need our own party.

We wanted to create it just to pass the law on veterans. But we believed the promise that it would be passed and that it would reflect the relevant benefits and status. But it never happened. Now we are more willing to create a party.

Because we came to understand that until our people are in the legislative body, we will not achieve anything. We need a party that will defend the interests of those who defended our homeland — military personnel in reserve, participants of actions in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Chernobyl cleanup veterans, and soldiers of particular risk. This is a very large category of Kazakhstanis, someone should defend their rights and interests in parliament.

Now there are three Afghan war veterans in parliament, but because they are few, they could not fully defend our rights. Basically, there are people in the parliament who have never taken part in a war and military service. No one but veterans who participated in the war can represent the interests of our category. Therefore, we need our own party.

This article was prepared as part of the Giving Voice, Driving Change - from the Borderland to the Steppes Project.



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