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Sustainable development

International cooperation and coordination for the human and ecological rehabilitation and economic development of the Semipalatinsk region of Kazakhstan

Report of the Secretary-General**

Summary

The present report is submitted in compliance with the request made by the General Assembly in its resolution [75/210](#). It provides a status report on the human and ecological rehabilitation and economic development of the Semipalatinsk region of Kazakhstan.

* [A/78/150](#).

** The present report was submitted after the deadline so as to include the most recent information.



I. Introduction

1. In support of the efforts of Kazakhstan to recover from the devastating consequences of nuclear testing at the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site, the General Assembly adopted 10 resolutions between 1997 and 2020 (resolutions [52/169 M](#), [53/1 H](#), [55/44](#), [57/101](#), [60/216](#), [63/279](#), [66/193](#), [69/209](#), [72/213](#) and [75/210](#)), calling on donor States and international development organizations to support the efforts of the country in improving the social, economic and environmental situation in the Semipalatinsk region.

2. In its latest resolution, [75/210](#), of 21 December 2020, the General Assembly urged the international community to provide assistance to Kazakhstan in formulating and implementing special programmes and projects for the treatment and care of the affected population and in its efforts to ensure economic growth and sustainable development in the Semipalatinsk region. It also requested the Secretary-General to report to the General Assembly at its seventy-eighth session, under the item entitled “Sustainable development”, on progress made in the implementation of the resolution.

3. To that end, the present report provides a summary of the progress made from 2020 to 2022 in the implementation of resolution [75/210](#) in the Semipalatinsk region by the Government of Kazakhstan, the United Nations and the international community.

4. The purpose of the present report is to outline the actions taken and progress made by the Government of Kazakhstan, United Nations entities and the international community in addressing the social, economic and ecological challenges in the rehabilitation and development of the Semipalatinsk region.

II. Context

5. Between 1949 and 1989, the Soviet Union conducted 456 nuclear tests at the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site, the primary testing ground of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. During the four decades of testing, the total energy released by the explosions was equivalent to approximately 2,500 Hiroshima atomic bombs. Until the signing of the Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space and Under Water in 1963, the explosions were mainly carried out on the surface and in the atmosphere. Afterwards, testing was conducted underground.

6. In 1989, the first Soviet anti-nuclear public movement, known as Nevada-Semipalatinsk, contributed to the end of nuclear arms tests at the Semipalatinsk site, along with other developments. The last nuclear test took place on 19 October 1989. On 29 August 1991, the Semipalatinsk site was officially closed. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Kazakhstan became the first country in history to voluntarily give up its nuclear arsenal, which at the time was the world’s fourth largest.

7. In the 30 years since, the Government and the people of Kazakhstan have been actively advocating for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, demonstrating a strong commitment to a nuclear-weapon-free world. Kazakhstan has continued to implement national strategies and programmes for the rehabilitation of the Semipalatinsk region and the improvement of the socioeconomic well-being of the affected people, including with international assistance.

8. In 2021, the United Nations office in Kazakhstan held a virtual round table to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the Semipalatinsk test site closure. Statements were

released to commemorate the anniversary, including some from bilateral and regional partners.

9. In 2022, the Government of Kazakhstan decided to create three new regions – Ulytau, Abay and Zhetysu.¹ The Abay Region was established on 8 June 2022, with the city of Semey (formerly known as Semipalatinsk) as its administrative centre. This administrative reform is expected to enable an increase in the investments and resources steered towards the development of the region, with a positive impact on the quality of life and well-being of the population. In this context, the establishment of the Abay Region is expected to contribute to infrastructure and new employment opportunities.

10. According to an internal assessment commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in preparation for programmatic expansion in the newly established regions, industry stands out as a leading sector in the economy of the Abay Region. Data from the UNDP assessment also indicate that primary production assets have been depleted, while efforts to introduce new technologies and innovations to enhance the competitiveness of industrial production have been insufficient, among several challenges facing the newly established region.

11. According to the UNDP assessment, the Abay Region also faces challenges in the education sector due to limited capacity at schools and preschools to accommodate all students.

12. In the health sector, insufficient medical equipment and ageing health-care facilities are of concern. High rates of neoplasm morbidity are reported in industrially developed areas and in territories adjacent to the former Semipalatinsk nuclear test site. The two leading causes of death in the Abay Region are circulatory system diseases followed by neoplasms. All told, 25.3 per cent of deaths in the region are attributed to circulatory system diseases, a rate that is higher than the national average (22.3 per cent). Meanwhile, 13.3 per cent of deaths are attributed to neoplasms, a rate that far exceeds the national average of 9.7 per cent.

13. Attention needs to be paid to unemployment, particularly among young people and women, the scarcity of decent, steady jobs in rural areas and the shortage of qualified workers to ensure equitable and just livelihood opportunities.

14. The Abay Region is also home to a large number of forests and steppes, which are currently facing the adverse impacts of climate change. According to the UNDP assessment and reports of recent wildlife incidents, fire departments in the region need additional equipment and modernization to enable them to combat forest and steppe fires more effectively.

III. Policy framework and Government programmes of assistance to the Semipalatinsk region

15. The Government of Kazakhstan has several policy frameworks and laws to provide assistance and rights-based social support to the individuals affected by nuclear tests at the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site. The overarching development policy and planning framework for Kazakhstan is called the Strategy Kazakhstan 2050, which is aimed at modernizing the country's economy and institutions. The strategy is being implemented throughout the country, including in the Semipalatinsk region.

¹ Presidential decree of 4 May 2022.

16. Other policy frameworks include laws on “Social protection of citizens who suffered from nuclear tests at the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site”, “Retirement insurance in the Republic of Kazakhstan”, “State social benefits for disability and loss of breadwinner in the Republic of Kazakhstan”, “Social protection of persons with disabilities in the Republic of Kazakhstan”, “Special social services” and “Special State benefits in the Republic of Kazakhstan”. The legislation provides several types of social support, including one-time monetary compensation and comprehensive medical examinations for those who have lived or are living in radiation risk zones. To date, over 1.1 million affected citizens have received such support.

17. Employers provide additional pay and additional paid annual leave to affected individuals who reside and work in legally designated radiation risk zones, depending on the area. Women who reside in these zones are entitled to a longer maternity leave.

18. Children whose parents lived, worked or served in the territories contaminated with radioactive substances during the period of nuclear testing and who have disabilities or diseases associated with radiation exposure are also recognized as victims of nuclear tests and are eligible for social support when a causal relationship is established between their health condition and their parents’ exposure to radiation in the affected areas.

19. Persons with disabilities due to environmental emergencies, including exposure to radiation during nuclear tests, are assigned a State social disability benefit once a causal relationship is established.

20. In addition, the Law on Veterans classifies those who directly participated in nuclear tests as veterans, which entitles them to benefits equal to those received by veterans of the Second World War. At the same time, their children who have a disability that is genetically related to their radiation exposure are also recognized as persons with disabilities due to harm received and entitled to the same social benefits.

21. Families of those who died from radiation sickness or those with disabilities related to the impact of radiation disasters and accidents also receive an allowance.

22. During the reporting period 2020–2022, the Government of Kazakhstan conducted several surveys and monitoring of the Semipalatinsk test site. The objective was to collect information to improve the environmental situation at the Semipalatinsk test site and adjacent territories.

23. A comprehensive environmental assessment of the territory of the Semipalatinsk test site within an 18,311.4-km² area was carried out from 2008 to 2021. The survey studied the amount of technogenic radionuclides in the main ecological assets, such as the soil, water and air. These data were used to determine the degree of radiation hazard in the surveyed area. The main outcome of the survey was the determination of the boundaries of areas with radioactive contamination from nuclear testing. The multivolume report on the comprehensive assessment is undergoing ecological assessment by the State and is not yet publicly available. In addition, follow-up work has been carried out to establish and develop a radiation monitoring system for the test site and an inventory of radiation-hazard facilities and to develop and maintain a system to restrict access to the high-risk test site area.

24. In 2022, the Government of Kazakhstan marked its thirtieth anniversary as a Member of the United Nations. The Government is committed to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

25. In 2020, the Government of Kazakhstan and the United Nations country team in Kazakhstan signed the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (2021–2025), following the previous Cooperation Framework (2016–2020),

to enhance cooperation in improving policy coherence of the country's national development priorities with the Sustainable Development Goals.

26. In 2022, the Government of Kazakhstan presented its second voluntary national review, confirming its willingness to implement the 2030 Agenda through existing institutional mechanisms, tools and plans or by establishing new ones. Kazakhstan has undertaken significant nationwide efforts towards implementation of the Goals to enhance the delivery of necessary assistance to the Semipalatinsk region.

IV. United Nations and international assistance to the Semipalatinsk region

United Nations and its specialized agencies

27. UNDP, in partnership with the Government of Kazakhstan and a private sector company, is supporting efforts to implement comprehensive measures in Semey to absorb carbon dioxide emissions from forest ecosystems. In 2021, under this initiative, UNDP conducted an inventory of unaccounted forests covering an area of 36,000 ha. These currently unmanaged forests are a potential source of emissions from fire and disease. The company is providing funding to transfer these forests to the State forest fund and improve their management to offset its carbon footprint.

28. During the period 2020–2021, UNDP supported local authorities from the Semey region, which was formerly part of the East Kazakhstan Region, in their response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. UNDP also worked towards improving the health and socioeconomic well-being of persons at greater risk of HIV infection and of HIV/AIDS patients by supporting efforts to improve access to essential health products. With a grant from the Asia Pacific Disaster Response Fund, managed by the Asian Development Bank and financed by the Government of Japan, UNDP procured and delivered medical kits to 11,394 low-income families in the region, which helped to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and ease the economic burden on those families. With grants from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, UNDP supplied the region with modern polymerase chain reaction (PCR) equipment and supplies aimed at addressing the needs of the population at higher risk.

29. In 2022, UNDP supported the Government of Kazakhstan in the preparations for its second voluntary national review by organizing discussions in all 17 regions of Kazakhstan, including East Kazakhstan. A two-day workshop in Semey engaged various stakeholders, such as local government, non-governmental organizations, academia, the private sector, young people and the vulnerable population. Using the game “Mission 2030” as an interactive learning tool, workshop participants discussed the principles and approaches of Sustainable Development Goal localization and collaboratively identified the most important challenges in the region and ways to address them, taking into consideration the interests of the poor and gender aspects.

30. From 2020 to 2022, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) engaged young volunteers in school-based volunteering programmes on different topics of interest and relevant to young people in Kazakhstan. More than 50 youth volunteers, including volunteers from the city of Semey, were engaged in the implementation of various programmes online and offline.

31. In March 2020, the UNICEF office in Kazakhstan and Al-Farabi Kazakh National University jointly launched an educational UniSat nanosatellite development project for girls to address gender stereotypes and to build technical and soft skills in young women leaders for decent employment opportunities. The programme covered all stages of nanosatellite development: engineering, design,

programming, assembly, testing and launch. Several girls from the Semey area were able to participate in the UNICEF “Skills4Girls” UniSat programme.

32. In 2020 and 2021, UNICEF piloted a “cash plus” programme in three regions of Kazakhstan, including East Kazakhstan Region (Altay and Glubokovskiy districts), which generated insightful evidence and recommendations to strengthen social services integration and the delivery of targeted social assistance to families living in poverty.

33. In 2021, UNICEF, in partnership with the Department of Employment and Social Programs of the Akimat of East Kazakhstan Region, supported the establishment of the Family Support Centre “Ten Kogam Bala” by engaging a team of experts in social work, child development, physical therapy, child psychology and cultural education. A total of 234 counselling and training sessions on prevention, treatment, care and support were delivered to more than 2,000 vulnerable families with children and adolescents living with HIV and other chronic diseases. Moreover, the Centre was provided with equipment for a sports education and physical therapy room, a neurosensory room for children with cerebral palsy and a Montessori room.

34. During 2020–2021, UNICEF continued to support the Semey region in efforts to prevent and respond to violence against children. Specifically, the Semey region, when it was part of East Kazakhstan Region, participated in a UNICEF-supported social behaviour change campaign for the prevention of violence against children. A community-based positive parenting programme was also tested in East Kazakhstan Region with the support of youth health centres and civil society organizations.

35. In 2021, to measure changes since a 2016 baseline survey on knowledge, attitudes and practices on violence against children in families in Kazakhstan, UNICEF conducted a follow-up survey in several regions, including East Kazakhstan. Some unchanged trends were concerning, but positive trends indicate that it is possible to change attitudes supportive of violence and that efforts to do so should be further pursued.

36. In 2021, UNICEF also conducted an evaluation of the system for preventing and responding to violence against children in four regions, including East Kazakhstan. The evaluation found evidence of delays, bottlenecks, and opportunities for further strengthening the child protection system.

37. From 2020 to 2022, to address the limited connectivity of schools, the UNICEF office in Kazakhstan supported a feasibility study of potential technical and financial solutions for upgrading school connectivity to broadband Internet in Kazakhstan under the global Giga initiative.

38. During the reporting period, UNICEF conducted several surveys to assess the current situation in the region. A report of UNICEF, *2021–2022 Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Survey on Early Childhood Developmental Monitoring in Kazakhstan*, also included surveys of parents, caregivers and health and preschool education workers from the Semey region.

39. In 2020, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) had project sites in the Abay Region under a joint project with the Global Environment Facility entitled “Integrated natural resources management in drought-prone and salt-affected agricultural production landscapes in Central Asia and Turkey”. Activities under that project included a geobotanical survey, development of land degradation and rangeland health maps, soil cultivation and wheatgrass planting, demonstrations of pasture rehabilitation practices applying phytomelioration techniques and capacity-building in the project regions.

40. In 2021, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) in Kazakhstan launched a science, technology, engineering and mathematics initiative for girls in the East Kazakhstan and Kyzylorda Regions, which includes the Semey region. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan funded this project to encourage investment, the empowerment of women and girls through access to science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and opportunities for them to learn, grow and develop professionally in education and careers in this field.

International Atomic Energy Agency

41. In May 1993, representatives of the Government of Kazakhstan informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of their concern about the radiological situation in Semipalatinsk and western Kazakhstan. Subsequently, the Government of Kazakhstan requested IAEA to provide assistance regarding the former test areas of Semipalatinsk and western Kazakhstan. IAEA has provided ongoing assistance to various needs related to the recovery of the Semipalatinsk test site since 1993.

42. In the period 2020–2022, IAEA provided assistance to the Semipalatinsk test site and the greater Semey region in the framework of the following national projects:

(a) KAZ9015, “Investigating potential sites for radioactive waste disposal facilities”, which aims to further characterize two potential sites on the Semipalatinsk test site for a geological disposal facility in accordance with the national framework for radioactive waste management in Kazakhstan. The initiative, which has a total budget of \$284,740, started in 2018 and is ongoing. The counterpart organization is the Institute of Geophysical Research in the city of Kurchatov;

(b) KAZ9016, “Supporting the transfer of the former Semipalatinsk test site land for economic use”, which aims to improve informed decision-making regarding the transfer of the former Semipalatinsk test site lands for economic use. The project started in 2020 and is still ongoing, and it has a total budget of \$215,518. The counterpart organization is the Institute of Radiation Safety and Ecology of the National Nuclear Centre of Kazakhstan in Kurchatov;

(c) KAZ9018, “Development of biological dosimetry to ensure preparedness and response to nuclear and radiological emergencies”, which aims to enhance national capabilities for biodosimetry for preparedness and response in nuclear and radiological emergencies. The project started in 2020 and is ongoing, and it has a total budget of \$255,363. The counterpart institute is the Institute of Radiation Safety and Ecology of the National Nuclear Centre of Kazakhstan in Kurchatov;

(d) KAZ6013, “Improving clinical practice at the Centre of Nuclear Medicine and Oncology of the East Region”, which aims to provide access to modern, safe methods of cancer diagnosis and treatment at the East Kazakhstan Oncology Centre No. 2 in Semey.

43. Owing to COVID-19 restrictions, capacity-building activities under these projects were put on hold; their implementation resumed in 2023. During the period 2020–2022, the focus of these projects was the preparation of technical specifications and procurement of necessary equipment.

International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

44. The Red Crescent branch in the Abay Region provides assistance to the most vulnerable segments of the population in the region on a regular basis in the form of food packages, hygiene products, clothing and shoes. Over the past three years, this assistance has reached more than 6,000 people.

45. The branch also conducts information campaigns for the general public on the prevention of infectious diseases (including COVID-19), preparedness for various emergencies, including disaster risk reduction measures, first aid skills and other topics. These activities have reached approximately 350,000 people over the past three years.

46. Since 2005, the Red Crescent of Kazakhstan, with the support of the Red Crescent of the United Arab Emirates, has provided assistance to children from poor, single-parent families who have lost their breadwinners. To date, 178 children in the Abay Region have received cash benefits from the Red Crescent of Kazakhstan under this assistance. Assistance is provided until the age of majority.

47. In addition to the above, in 2021, the Red Crescent branch in the Abay Region purchased and donated electrocardiographs for hospitals located in remote areas of the Abay Region.

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development

48. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has a partnership with the Government of Kazakhstan (Ministry of National Economy) to provide advisory services to small businesses. The EBRD small and medium-sized enterprise advisory unit has supported entrepreneurs from the Abay Region since 2003 out of its representative office in Oskemen (East Kazakhstan). To date, EBRD has supported 487 projects in Oskemen, Pavlodar and Semey, of which 62 (13 per cent) are in the Abay Region. The grants allocated to small and medium-sized enterprises amount to a total of \$2.2 million, with enterprises from the Abay Region receiving \$269,380. A total of 19 qualified local consultants work with EBRD. The most popular consulting projects are engineering development (26 per cent), information and communications technology (22 per cent), marketing (10 per cent) and quality management (10 per cent). EBRD cooperates with the Damu Fund, the National Chamber of Entrepreneurs, and the Entrepreneurship Development Department of the Akimat, as well as with partner financial institutions and local consultants. EBRD has continued such activities in 2023 with advisory projects engaging local and international industry experts, a business training series, and gender development events.

49. In 2020, the city of Semey joined the EBRD Green Cities programme. A key part of participation in this programme is to prepare a Green City Action Plan to improve the quality of the local environment and tackle climate change-related issues. The city of Semey has been working on its action plan since November 2021 with support from an international consulting firm of experts in urban planning. The city completed the first stage of the action plan, a baseline environment and infrastructure assessment, in December 2022. The next stage is to develop and agree upon a list of green investment projects and policy measures for the city's municipal infrastructure.

Government of Canada

50. The Government of Canada had several projects in the Abay Region during the reporting period. In November 2017, it launched a project to provide Kazakhstan with an in-kind contribution of a radionuclide monitoring station for installation at the National Nuclear Centre in Kurchatov. The goal is to establish the radionuclide monitoring station as the first ever prototype Cooperating National Facility to help the Provisional Technical Secretariat of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization to develop procedures relating to the operation of such facilities. At the time of reporting, the project was still at the implementation stage and was scheduled to be completed at the end of 2023.

51. In October 2017, Canada signed an agreement with the Office of Radiological Security of the National Nuclear Security Administration of the Department of Energy of the United States of America to collaborate on a project to strengthen national capacity in Kazakhstan to safely and securely manage disused sealed radioactive sources at the end of their lifespan. The project consists of the design and construction of an upgraded and expanded long-term storage facility at the Institute of Nuclear Physics to store radioactive sources. Completion of the project is tentatively scheduled for the third quarter of 2023.

52. In December 2021, Canada launched a project with the United States Department of Energy to support efforts to remove high enriched uranium from a research reactor in Kurchatov by providing funding to repair and refurbish key equipment needed to facilitate the removal, including a gantry crane and power systems.

Government of Germany

53. The Government of Germany opened a homeless centre in Semey as part of a microproject during the reporting period. A biodiversity-themed project in the Abay Region is currently being discussed.

Government of Switzerland

54. In 2020, the Government of Switzerland provided \$6,768 in funding for a project entitled “Young people with disabilities: a summer school in the East Kazakhstan Region”. The project was postponed several times owing to COVID-19 but was successfully implemented in October 2021.

V. Priorities for future action

55. The Government of Kazakhstan remains strongly committed to rehabilitating and developing the Semipalatinsk region so it can recover from the consequences of its legacy as a nuclear test site in collaboration with the international community and civil society. It is noteworthy that, despite the devastating global COVID-19 pandemic, efforts to rehabilitate and develop the region continued.

56. At the same time, the long-term development of the affected region requires stronger efforts from the Government and further support of the international community. In line with the programmes and legislation of the Government of Kazakhstan to rehabilitate the territory of the former Semipalatinsk nuclear test site, the following priorities will require additional focus and coordinated action from the Government and the international community in the upcoming period:

(a) Strengthening the primary health-care and health management system, improving medical infrastructure, and enhancing the supply of medical equipment in the region, with a particular focus on improving reproductive, maternal and child health outcomes and protection and ensuring equal access, especially for vulnerable groups and those living in rural areas;

(b) Closing the urban/rural divide to address poverty and unemployment issues in the region;

(c) Eliminating all forms of domestic and gender-based violence, as well as addressing harmful social norms and practices that perpetuate various forms of inequality;

(d) Investing in skills development programmes such as learning in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, vocational training and apprenticeships to

support economic activities in the region, with a special focus on young people, women and girls;

(e) Improving educational policies, the quality of education and education infrastructure with special attention to addressing learning losses resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown periods;

(f) Enhancing environmental remediation of contaminated sites for the ecological rehabilitation of the affected region, with emphasis on restoring ecosystems and improving the health and function of ecosystem populations;

(g) Enhancing firefighting capability in response to the impact of climate change on forests and steppes through the modernization of fire departments;

(h) Supporting regional development strategies and action plans of the recently formed Abay Region;

(i) Continuously monitoring the overall safety and resilience of the region, with the aim of leaving no one behind and promoting a green economy;

(j) Enhancing coordination between local and central governments and the engagement of civil society and the development community to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

57. The Semipalatinsk test site remains a symbol of nuclear disarmament and hope for a world free of nuclear weapons. During the reporting period, the Government of Kazakhstan continued to advocate for the concept of a nuclear-weapon-free world, spreading further the hope born in Semipalatinsk.

58. The joint efforts and commitments of the Government, civil society, the United Nations and the international community at large contributed to improving the social, ecological and economic conditions of the people affected by the Semipalatinsk test site. The Secretary-General calls upon the international community to further support the joint work of the Government and the United Nations by:

(a) Providing the technical, expert and financial assistance needed for the implementation of national development programmes for the rehabilitation and development of the Semipalatinsk region;

(b) Promoting international awareness of the humanitarian and environmental devastation caused by the nuclear tests in Semipalatinsk and of the ongoing challenges of the people affected by the test site;

(c) Strengthening coordination and information-sharing among various actors in the region to plan, implement and monitor inclusive regional socioeconomic programmes and services, with special attention to vulnerable groups in the region, especially people affected by the test site.

59. In support of efforts by the Government of Kazakhstan to make the assistance given to alleviate the tragic consequences of nuclear testing more effective, the Secretary-General acknowledges the existing positive developments in the region and encourages the international community to intensify its contributions towards the rehabilitation of the Semipalatinsk region.