

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 1, 2019

The Honorable Michael Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

I write today with urgency and concern over the treatment of State Department employees who were medically evacuated to the United States after experiencing symptoms related to an “unexplained health incident” potentially as a result of an attack overseas. After speaking with several individuals associated with these incidents, including victims, it has come to my attention that over a dozen employees of the U.S. Mission in China have experienced Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and other concussion-like symptoms previously seen in at least 26 diplomats stationed in Havana, Cuba. Despite stark similarities between the experiences and symptoms of those injured in both Cuba and China, the State Department, to date, has confirmed only one case from China. All others who experienced the onset of their symptoms in China were deemed to have an “unconfirmed” condition, leaving these individuals and their families without an adequate explanation or support. The State Department’s perplexing response has resulted in disparate treatment regarding leave, medical benefits and travel between the two groups of employees, potential adverse security clearance actions and a dangerous lack of information regarding the causation and potential prevention of these attacks.

While I understand the complex nature of this issue, I am worried that the State Department’s opaque process for confirming cases is affecting the well-being and livelihoods of the personnel affected. For example, the State Department’s Bureau of Medical Services has provided certain individuals with “confirmed” status and documentation that clearly indicates that they were injured as a part of their duties. Others, however, were not given the same type of paperwork, which may affect their worker’s compensation claims and security clearance renewals. Many employees who were evacuated from China were also denied access to their own medical test results, and some were even chastised for visiting doctors outside of those suggested by the State Department. These accounts of the Department’s behavior toward affected employees are worrisome and seem inconsistent with the State Department’s briefings to Congress and with the Accountability Review Board’s (ARB) findings and recommendations which encourage treatment, support and transparency for all potential victims of these attacks.

As you know, many affected employees in Cuba and China are already inaccurately being accused of experiencing mass hysteria. The group from China, in particular, is increasingly feeling isolated and left behind by their colleagues and leadership at the State Department. Yet, despite the preponderance of personal narratives and medical data collected by the University of Pennsylvania, the Bureau of Medical Services and other facilities, there has been no known effort to centralize this information and methodically examine these cases in a systematic way.

Without this type of government clearinghouse, we can only expect a continued lack of preparation in the future.

Given the impact of the Department's determinations on the health and careers of employees, I ask that you immediately instruct the Bureau of Medical Services to re-examine the cases from China, allow all affected individuals to see the results of their own medical tests and ensure that the same standards are being used to confirm and treat all reported cases. The State Department must also adhere to the commitments it made as part of the ARB process and provide all injured personnel with equal access to treatment, leave and benefits in order to help them and their families recover as soon as possible.

Further, I ask that all relevant State Department officials, including the Deputy Secretary, who is charged with overseeing the implementation of the ARB's findings, appear before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I would like to hear how these attacks have affected employees at the Department and their families, what Congress can do to help ensure long-term care for these employees and how the Department is handling reports from affected employees about ongoing issues upon their return to the United States.

I appreciate your urgent attention to this important matter. I look forward to your reply and to working with you and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to arrange an appropriate time and date for a briefing with Senators.

Sincerely,



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

CC: The Honorable John Sullivan, Deputy Secretary of State, U.S. Department of State
The Honorable Wilbur Ross, Secretary of Commerce, U.S. Department of Commerce
The Honorable Terry Branstad, U.S. Ambassador to China, U.S. Embassy Beijing
Dr. Mara Tekach, Chargé d'Affaires, U.S. Embassy Havana
Mr. Michael Evanoff, Assistant Secretary of State for Diplomatic Security, U.S. Department of State
Dr. Charles Rosenfarb, Medical Director, Bureau of Medical Services, U.S. Department of State