



## Kazakh president arrives in UK for two-day visit

**Nursultan Nazarbayev, whose regime has been criticised by rights groups, will meet David Cameron, the Queen and UK business leaders**

**Luke Harding**

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The man who has ruled Kazakhstan for two and a half decades, President Nursultan Nazarbayev, has arrived in London on an official visit amid criticism from rights groups over the Central Asian state's repressive record.

During his two-day stay Nazarbayev will meet David Cameron, the Queen and UK business leaders, and he is expected to sign a mutual legal assistance treaty.

In recent years, Kazakhstan has been exasperated by the flight of several senior Kazakh figures who have sought refuge in London. They include Mukhtar Ablyazov, a former banker now fighting extradition in France and whose property assets the government in Astana is keen to recover.

Another exile with assets in the UK was Rakhat Aliyev, Nazarbayev's former son-in-law, who in February was found dead in an Austrian prison cell. A former deputy head of Kazakhstan's secret police and ambassador to Austria, he faced charges of murder and kidnapping.

Cameron visited Kazakhstan two years ago; Tony Blair is a paid Nazarbayev adviser. The Foreign Office minister Tobias Ellwood recently hailed Kazakhstan as a modernising nation,

“on the verge of becoming a significant regional and international player”, and said Britain wanted to be its “partner of choice”.

On Tuesday Human Rights Watch described the post-Soviet republic as an entrenched authoritarian dictatorship where “few tangible and meaningful human rights and rule of law reforms have been forthcoming in recent years.” It said Kazakhstan had “long been a country of quiet repression”.

According to HRW, the Astana government has clamped down on critics since December 2011 when police officers opened fire on striking oil workers in western Kazakhstan, killing 12. The authorities have closed media outlets, fined and thrown people in jail for participating in peaceful protests, and targeted people who practice their faith outside state controls, it says.

The opposition leader, Vladimir Kozlov, is serving a seven-year prison sentence on the criminal charge of “inciting social discord” after what HRW said was a flawed trial in 2012.

“Kazakhstan has indeed made economic and other advances on the world stage in recent years, but when it comes to human rights and rule of law, Kazakhstan is lagging far behind, and Britain should say so,” said Mihra Rittmann, Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch.

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