



"It came with the wind..."

**HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT ASSESSMENT
OF THE COVID-19 RESPONSE IN
TURKMENISTAN**

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IPHR International
Partnership
for Human Rights



This paper has been prepared within the framework of an initiative of International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) and its partners from Central Asia to monitor and document the human rights impact of governments' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in this region. The primary focus of this initiative is the protection of the fundamental freedoms of expression, association and assembly; the rights to liberty and security and access to justice; as well as the rights of vulnerable groups. The Central Asian papers, planned to be compiled into a common, regional report when they have all been finalised, are also part of a broader IPHR initiative to assess governments' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic across the Former Soviet Union (FSU). All country reports prepared in this context are based on information and data provided by national focal points – local researchers working with IPHR – and local civil society organisations with which IPHR has been collaborating for many years, as well as on information obtained through additional research conducted by IPHR. While collecting the data we paid particular attention to rights violations that occurred exclusively in the context of restrictive measures and policies that were introduced by the local authorities in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we also documented developments related to pre-existing trends of concern that were reinforced during the pandemic.



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Summary¹

Turkmenistan is one of the world's most closed countries, where the government tightly controls the flow of information, suppresses dissent and covers up developments that may reflect badly on those in power. The government's approach to the global Covid-19 pandemic fits into this pattern: it has responded with denial, lack of transparency and attempts to conceal the truth. After the president called for making "every effort" to prevent Covid-19 from reaching Turkmenistan, the government appeared bent on demonstrating the absence of Covid-19 in the country at any cost.

Thus, through mid-July 2020, the government continued to insist that there were no cases of Covid-19 infections in the country, although independent, exile-based sources reported about a growing number of such cases. By June, there was evidence of a widening outbreak of Covid-19, with independent sources reporting about hospitals being strained by the influx of people with acute respiratory conditions classified as pneumonia, as well as increasing mortality rates due to these conditions. Those believed to have contracted and died of Covid-19 include medical professionals.

Independent sources have also reported about doctors and other medical workers being pressured to help cover up the Covid-19 outbreak in the country by disguising Covid-19 cases and refraining from discussing and sharing information about them. The authorities have sought to stifle discussion among residents on Covid-19, including by detaining and intimidating people speaking about Covid-19 related issues in public places. National state-controlled media outlets have only provided limited, selective coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic, communicating state-endorsed messages and praising the measures taken by the government to combat the Coronavirus. At the same time, the authorities have continued their attempts to discredit and obstruct the work of independent Turkmenistan-covering outlets based abroad.

Available information suggests that, during the first few months of the global pandemic, the authorities failed to enforce adequate safety protocols for the treatment of patients with Covid-19 symptoms and did not provide medical workers with adequate protection against this disease. Independent sources reported about the lack of protective clothing and equipment, with medical workers sometimes having to buy or sew face masks and other means of protection themselves. More systematic use of adequate protective equipment appeared to begin only in the summer when the number of suspected Covid-19 cases increased and a mission from the World Health Organization (WHO) was set to arrive to look into the Covid-19 situation in the country.

The government was slow in facilitating the WHO mission: while the WHO announced plans to visit Turkmenistan in late April 2020, the mission took place only in the first half of July, with five WHO experts spending ten days in the country. According to information from TIHR and other independent sources, the authorities sought to prevent the WHO experts from learning the truth about Covid-19 in the country by removing all patients with symptoms indicative of this disease from the facilities the experts were expected to visit. At the end of their visit, the WHO experts commended the measures taken by the government to prevent the spread of Covid-19 and concluded that the national health care system had the "necessary capacity" to counter this disease. The mission team also told journalists that they had "not seen a large number" of patients with respiratory conditions in the hospitals they visited, explaining that they had been taken to facilities that they had requested to visit in advance. However, the experts also said that they were "extremely concerned" about the many reports of "an increasing

¹ This briefing paper covers developments through 15 July 2020.

number of acute respiratory infections or pneumonia of unknown origin” in the country and called on the authorities to step up measures to identify, test, isolate and treat patients with such symptoms and to share test samples with the WHO for re-testing.

While applauded by the WHO experts at the time of their mission, the authorities’ approach to Covid-19 prevention has been conflicting and inconsistent. When the global pandemic began, the authorities took some steps to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus in Turkmenistan, such as by limiting movements across and within the national borders and by promoting hygiene-related measures. The authorities also used more questionable tactics such as measuring the body temperature of residents at various checkpoints, with those found to have an elevated temperature risking to be forcibly placed under quarantine. Moreover, in order to supposedly “prevent panic” in relation to the pandemic, the authorities implemented measures that directly contradicted the objective of countering the spread of Covid-19. For example, police stopped and intimidated people using face masks in the street, and the authorities organised regime-praising mass events instead of promoting social distancing.

In connection with the WHO mission, when the number of suspected Covid-19 cases was on the rise, the authorities introduced previously unprecedented lockdown and preventive measures. Among others, they enforced a new requirement to use face masks in public places and charged police with monitoring compliance with it. However, instead of explaining the real purpose of these measures, the authorities referred to the purported surge in dust in the air. At this time, the authorities also claimed that national research had shown that viruses may be “carried by air currents”, and thus appeared to suggest that Covid-19 may be found to have reached Turkmenistan without this meaning that the government had failed in its efforts to prevent this from happening.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, there have been worsening shortages of major food staples sold at a fixed price at state-run stores in Turkmenistan. This has resulted in rare, spontaneous protests that the authorities have sought to quell using both persuasion and intimidation. Students enrolled at universities abroad, who returned to Turkmenistan following the outbreak of the global pandemic, had difficulties to continue their studies on distance because of the country’s expensive and poor internet connections. Based on what is known about the conditions within the country’s secretive prison system, there are serious reasons to fear for the health, well-being and lives of prisoners should Covid-19 spread within this system. These concerns are particularly acute with respect to prisoners held on politically motivated grounds.

Government policy of denial

As the pandemic began, the Turkmenistani authorities took some steps to prevent the Coronavirus from spreading to and inside Turkmenistan, including by restricting travel across the national borders, placing those arriving from abroad under quarantine, limiting internal migration, and promoting hygiene related measures.² When speaking at a government meeting on 8 March 2020, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov stated that the authorities had taken “timely” preventive measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and that they should continue to make “every effort” to ensure that the pandemic

² These measures were outlined a government document submitted to the UN in May 2020. See more in TIHR, “Туркменистан рассказал ООН об ограничениях на въезд в приграничные районы и других мерах борьбы с COVID-19”, 24 May 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/un-letter/>

did not reach Turkmenistan.³ In line with this statement, the government's approach to the pandemic appears to have been bent on demonstrating the absence of Covid-19 cases in the country at any cost.

Thus, although independent Turkmenistan-covering sources based abroad reported about the first Covid-19 cases in the country in March 2020 (see more below), the government insisted that there were no such cases. At a government briefing held for representatives of international organisations on 22 April 2020, Foreign Minister Raşit Meredow dismissed allegations that the government was concealing cases of Covid-19 infections. He said that the government is "not hiding anything" and that it "immediately would inform" the WHO about any confirmed case of Covid-19.⁴

The Prague-based Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Azatlyk, first reported about suspected Covid-19 cases in Turkmenistan at the beginning of March 2020.⁵ In the following months, this service and other independent Turkmenistan-covering outlets reported about a growing number of such cases. By June 2020, their reports pointed to the widespread occurrence of cases in which people were being diagnosed with respiratory problems characteristic of Covid-19.⁶ In mid-June 2020, Radio Azatlyk reported about hospitals being "overfull" with patients with Covid-19 like symptoms and a greatly increasing mortality rate in the country.⁷ People working at the Centre for the Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases in Ashgabat told the service that there was a "serious outbreak" of acute pneumonia – which is known as a serious complication of Covid-19 – and that some patients were arriving "in a critical condition" and that there were "fatalities".⁸ Other sources within the health care system confirmed to the service that the outbreak in reality was one of Covid-19.⁹ Other independent Turkmenistan-covering outlets also covered the increase in acute pneumonia cases. For example, the Netherlands-based Turkmen News reported that over 30 patients diagnosed with acute pneumonia were being treated at the regional hospital in Turkmenabat. According to the outlet's sources, this was the highest number of patients with such a diagnosis that had ever been treated at the hospital at the same time.¹⁰ At the beginning of July 2020, Radio Azatlyk had received information about "dozens" of Covid-19 suspected deaths, although it had not been able to confirm all of them.¹¹ In mid-July, TIHR's correspondents reported that only in Ashgabat an average of 8-12 people died of pneumonia every day.¹² Independent sources also reported that several medical institutions in the

³ Turkmenistan Today, "Президент Туркменистана провёл совещание по вопросам здравоохранения и образования", 8 April 2020, <http://tdh.gov.tm/news/articles.aspx&article22023&cat11>

⁴ TIHR, "Представители Туркменистана отвергли обвинения в сокрытии случаев заражения коронавирусом и рассказали о трех карантинных зонах", 23 April 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/denial-stage-2/>

⁵ Radio Azatlyk, "Сообщения о коронавирусе в Туркменистане. Реакция властей", 8 March 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/secretive-turkmenistan-beefs-up-coronavirus-measures-amid-reports-of-first-infections/30475834.html>

⁶ See also Human Rights Watch, "Turkmenistan Denies Apparent Covid-19 Outbreak", 27 June 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/27/turkmenistan-denies-apparent-covid-19-outbreak>

⁷ Radio Azatlyk, "В Ашхабаде вспышка пневмонии, Российский посол поддерживает официальную версию Туркменистана об отсутствии в стране COVID-19", 12 June 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30666845.html>

⁸ Radio Azatlyk, "В Туркменабаде оцеплена больница, в Дашогузе сооружен палаточный карантин для пациентов с COVID-19", 11 June 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30664822.html>

⁹ Radio Azatlyk, "В Ашхабаде некоторые медучреждения закрываются на карантин, частные предприятия будут работать дистанционно", 3 June 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30704268.html>

¹⁰ Turkmen News, "Туркменистан: Увеличилось число пациентов с острой пневмонией", 15 June 2020, <https://turkmen.news/news/pneumonia-turkmenistan/>

¹¹ Statements made by the head of the service at "Turkmenistan and the Fight Against COVID-19" virtual event hosted by Central Asia Program at the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian studies at the George Washington University on 6 July 2020. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBIDJWKPzFA&fbclid=IwAR2zARnIUiQgMTUmOWjOVFVjyxzNnUeXo7LEeTSaHXgmg0_DnqC4X1YcCl

¹² TIHR, "Ежедневно от «пневмонии» в Ашхабаде умирают как минимум 8-12 человек", 21 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/death-rate/>

country were placed under quarantine,¹³ and that regular hospitals and previous commercial facilities were being refurbished to accommodate patients suspected of having Covid-19, which indicated that there was insufficient capacity at hospitals already previously dealing with such cases.¹⁴ Relatives of people concluded to have died of pneumonia reported receiving their loved ones in sealed plastic packages and being instructed not to open them before burial.¹⁵

Those believed to have contracted and died of Covid-19 include medical professionals. For example, at the end of June 2020, TIHR learned that six doctors and other medical workers at the Ashgabat Medical Advisory Centre named after former President Saparmurad Niyazov - a leading hospital - had been found to have Covid-19.¹⁶ Later TIHR learned about the death of a doctor in Ashgabat, with pneumonia being indicated as the official reason for her death.¹⁷ In mid-June, Turkmen News reported that several doctors and nurses working at a local health care clinic in Ashgabat's Gaydan district had tested positively for Covid-19.¹⁸ Radio Azatlyk has also reported about Covid-19 cases among medical staff,¹⁹ as well as about deaths due to Covid-19 among this group.²⁰

Despite the growing evidence that Covid-19 was spreading in Turkmenistan, and that people were dying of this disease, the authorities still failed to acknowledge the Covid-19 epidemic in the country. However, at the beginning of July 2020, when the WHO mission had arrived to the country and unprecedented, preventive measures had been initiated (see more below), the Foreign Ministry issued a press release that appeared to suggest that Covid-19 might be found to have reached Turkmenistan, without this meaning the failure of the government's efforts to prevent this from happening. The press release claimed that "many years of research" by Turkmenistani experts had confirmed that "substances hazardous to human health, including viruses, can be carried by air currents to the sensitive ecological environment of Central Asia".²¹ State media reported that President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov made similar suggestions during a phone call with Kazakhstan's former President Nursultan Nazarbayev on 10 July.²²

¹³ Radio Azatlyk, "В Ашхабаде некоторые медучреждения закрываются на карантин, частные предприятия будут работать дистанционно", 3 July 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30704268.html>

¹⁴ TIHR, "В Ашхабаде еще одно здание «Полимекс» переоборудовали в медстационар", 7 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/polimex-appropriated/>; Radio Azatlyk, "Эксперты ВОЗ в Туркменистане, в больницы продолжают поступать больные с симптомами COVID-19", 7 July 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30711195.html>

¹⁵ Radio Azatlyk, "Все что угодно, только не коронавирус. В Туркменистане введены жесткие меры, но COVID-19 не признают", 14 July 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30725228.html>; TIHR, "COVID-19: В Ашхабаде от пневмонии скончалась врач, а в аптеках выстроились очереди за масками", 13 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/covid-victim/>

¹⁶ TIHR, "У ряда работников ашхабадской больницы им. С.А.Ниязова диагностирован COVID-19", 23 June 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/niyazov-hospital/>

¹⁷ TIHR, "COVID-19: В Ашхабаде от пневмонии скончалась врач, а в аптеках выстроились очереди за масками", 13 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/covid-victim/>

¹⁸ Turkmen News, "Туркменистан: Увеличилось число пациентов с острой пневмонией", 15 June 2020, <https://turkmen.news/news/pneumonia-turkmenistan/>

¹⁹ See, for example, Radio Azatlyk, "В Туркменабаде оцеплена больница, в Дашогузе сооружен палаточный карантин для пациентов с COVID-19", 11 June 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30664822.html>

²⁰ Radio Azatlyk, "В Туркменистане на фоне вспышки пневмонии есть смертельные случаи среди врачей", 16 June 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30673339.html>

²¹ "МИД Туркменистана распространил пресс-релиз по противодействию COVID-19", 8 July 2020, <https://turkmenportal.com/blog/28706/mid-turkmenistana-rasprostranil-pressreliz-po-protivodeistviyu-covid19>

²² TIHR, "Бердымухамедов обсудил с Назарбаевым как вирусы могут переноситься ветром из Приаралья", 11 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/rly/>

Doctors pressured and the health of both medical workers and patients endangered

In a review published at the beginning of May 2020, the Prague-based exile NGO Rights and Freedoms said that doctors working in Turkmenistan had told the organisation that they had been instructed to conceal any instances of Coronavirus or respiratory infections among patients. Interviewed doctors said that they did not even have access to Covid-19 testing and analyses.²³ Other reports received by the organisation confirmed the lack of testing capacity.²⁴ Health care professionals also told Radio Azatlyk, on condition of anonymity, that they had been prohibited from registering Covid-19 cases, or Covid-19 characteristic symptoms.²⁵ One doctor told the service that the authorities treat Covid-19 related deaths as classified information and threaten medical workers with repercussions should they leak such information.²⁶

These kinds of attempts to pressure doctors to participate in covering up the outbreak of Covid-19 in the country are highly disturbing. They are also likely to have resulted in that patients seeking assistance for Covid-19 symptoms did not receive appropriate diagnosis and treatment and that relevant measures were not taken to prevent infected individuals from infecting others. Some doctors told Rights and Freedoms that they continued to go to work and treat patients, even if they had had mild symptoms of acute respiratory infection.²⁷

Available information also indicates that, during the first few months of the global pandemic, the authorities failed to enforce adequate safety protocols for the examination and treatment of patients with Covid-19 symptoms and did not provide medical workers with adequate protection against this disease. In its May 2020 review of the situation, Rights and Freedoms found that there was a lack of protective suits and other equipment for medical workers and that doctors typically used only gloves when examining patients. The organisation also learned that medical workers had been requested to purchase face masks and gloves at their own expense.²⁸ The reports of other independent organisations similarly pointed to the lack of protective equipment. TIHR's correspondents learned that doctors and nurses in the city of Turkmenabat wore regular medical gowns when examining and treating people held under quarantine after returning from abroad. This was particularly alarming as the same staff members reportedly attended both to those who had a temperature or other signs of potentially being

²³ Rights and Freedoms, "Amid The Global COVID-19 Pandemic, Turkmenistan Continues To Deny The Existence Of The Coronavirus Cases In The Country", 4 May 2020, <https://turkmenyurt.tv/en/amid-the-global-covid-19-pandemic-turkmenistan-continues-to-deny-the-existence-of-the-coronavirus-cases-in-the-country/>

²⁴ Rights and Freedoms, "The Modern Realities Of Medicine In Turkmenistan, And The Global COVID-19 Pandemic", May 2020, <https://turkmenyurt.tv/en/the-modern-realities-of-medicine-in-turkmenistan-and-the-global-covid-19-pandemic/>

²⁵ Radio Azatlyk, "В Ашхабаде вспышка пневмонии, Российский посол поддерживает официальную версию Туркменистана об отсутствии в стране COVID-19", 12 June 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30666845.html>

²⁶ Radio Azatlyk, "В Туркменистане началось тотальное ношение масок", 14 July 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30724416.html>

²⁷ Rights and Freedoms, "Amid The Global COVID-19 Pandemic, Turkmenistan Continues To Deny The Existence Of The Coronavirus Cases In The Country", 4 May 2020, <https://turkmenyurt.tv/en/amid-the-global-covid-19-pandemic-turkmenistan-continues-to-deny-the-existence-of-the-coronavirus-cases-in-the-country/>

²⁸ Rights and Freedoms, "Amid The Global COVID-19 Pandemic, Turkmenistan Continues To Deny The Existence Of The Coronavirus Cases In The Country", 4 May 2020, <https://turkmenyurt.tv/en/amid-the-global-covid-19-pandemic-turkmenistan-continues-to-deny-the-existence-of-the-coronavirus-cases-in-the-country/>

Covid-19 infected and to those without any such signs.²⁹ Radio Azatlyk's correspondents found that doctors working with quarantined patients in Turkmenabat were sewing protective suits and masks themselves.³⁰ The service also reported that medical workers at most of Ashgabat's medical facilities were still working without face masks and gloves in May³¹ and that staff at the capital's Centre for the Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases did not start using special protective suits until June.³² Only as of late June did the use of protective masks, gloves and suits appear to be enforced across medical institutions in the country.³³

WHO mission obstructed

In response to the government's declarations about the absence of any Covid-19 infections in the country, the WHO announced its intention to visit Turkmenistan on 23 April 2020.³⁴ The initial plan was to coordinate this mission with a visit to Tajikistan, another Central Asian country that had reported zero Covid-19 infections as of late April 2020 (but soon thereafter confirmed the first cases). However, while a WHO mission arrived in Tajikistan on 1 May³⁵, the WHO only confirmed having received an invitation to visit Turkmenistan on 5 May,³⁶ and this was followed by a protracted period of agreeing the details of the visit with the Turkmenistani authorities. In response to a media inquiry, on 3 June, WHO Regional Director for Europe Hans Kluge said that the mission would take place "within a couple of weeks",³⁷ but it was delayed for another month. Finally, on 6 July, a WHO mission comprised of five experts arrived in Turkmenistan for a 10-day deployment.³⁸

In connection with the visit of the WHO mission, local correspondents working for TIHR and other independent Turkmenistan-covering outlets based abroad reported that the authorities stepped up measures apparently aimed at preventing the spread of Covid-19. These measures included, among others, systematic disinfection of streets and means of public transportation, the closure of state institutions and temporary (paid) lay-offs at others, and the suspension of railway and bus traffic between

²⁹ TIHR, "Прибывающие из-за рубежа граждане должны пройти двухнедельный карантин в Туркменабате (видео)", 1 April 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/two-weeks-quarantine/>

³⁰ Radio Azatlyk, "На фоне запрета на упоминание COVID-19 в Туркменистане подготавливают стационарные лечебные заведения", 3 April 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30527087.html>

³¹ Radio Azatlyk, ОБСЕ и ВОЗ проводят в Туркменистане семинар по обучению медицинским навыкам", 20 May 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30623605.html>

³² Radio Azatlyk, "В Ашхабаде вспышка пневмонии, Российский посол поддерживает официальную версию Туркменистана об отсутствии в стране COVID-19", 12 June 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30666845.html>

³³ "Туркменистан создает новые карантинные зоны, население опасается обращаться к врачам", 26 June 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30691953.html>

³⁴ Tweet posted by Hans Kluge on 23 April 2020, https://twitter.com/hans_kluge/status/1253321797228826624

³⁵ "WHO/Europe COVID-19 mission arrives in Tajikistan: International experts to support country's response to the pandemic", 2 May 2020, <http://www.euro.who.int/en/media-centre/sections/press-releases/2020/who-europe-covid-19-mission-arrives-in-tajikistan-international-experts-to-support-countrys-response-to-the-pandemic>

³⁶ TIHR, "Туркменистан наконец отправил приглашение миссии экспертов ВОЗ", 8 May 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/invitation/>

³⁷ TIHR, "Миссия ВОЗ посетит Туркменистан в ближайшие две недели", 4 June 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/whos-coming/>

³⁸ "WHO/Europe expert team reaches Turkmenistan to support the country's COVID-19 response", 7 July 2020, <https://www.euro.who.int/en/countries/turkmenistan/news/news/2020/7/who-europe-expert-team-reaches-turkmenistan-to-support-the-countrys-covid-19-response>

the capital and other cities.³⁹ While the use of face masks in public had previously been discouraged, the authorities now enforced a requirement to wear face masks for bus drivers, pharmacy staff, supermarket cashiers and others working in public service sectors, as well as for common residents (see more below).

TIHR and other independent Turkmenistan-covering sources also learned about measures taken by the authorities to prevent the WHO experts from finding out the real state of affairs with respect to Covid-19 in the country. According to TIHR's information, the authorities began considering such measures immediately after the initial announcement of the upcoming WHO visit and decided to transfer COVID-19 infected individuals to hospitals located in remote areas of the country.⁴⁰ As the WHO mission began, Radio Azatlyk correspondents reported that the authorities had specifically prepared hospitals and other facilities that the WHO experts would visit by moving all patients with Covid-19 symptoms being treated there to other facilities.⁴¹ TIHR's correspondents also reported that medical facilities in Turkmenabat, which the WHO experts were expected to visit, were emptied of Covid-19 patients.⁴²

On 15 July 2020, the WHO experts held a press briefing in Ashgabat about their findings.⁴³ The experts said that they had visited hospitals, health care centres, laboratories and border checkpoints during their 10-day stay in the country. They concluded that the authorities were "fully aware" of the danger posed by the Coronavirus and commended the preventive measures taken by the government. They also found that the national health care system "has the necessary capacity" to counter Covid-19.⁴⁴ Later WHO Senior Emergency Officer for Europe Catherine Smallwood, who led the mission, told journalists that, in the hospitals that the experts had seen, there was a "high level of preparedness for Covid-19" and "not a large number of people with respiratory diseases". She also said that the experts had visited the facilities that they had requested to see in advance. Citing official figures, she stated that the central laboratory had carried out over 60 000 Covid-19 tests and said more detailed figures on testing would be provided in the forthcoming mission report.⁴⁵ As of mid-July 2020, the government had had not made public any information about the number of Covid-19 administered tests, diagnoses or deaths in the country.

³⁹ For more information, see TIHR, "В Туркменистане вводят новые меры профилактики распространения COVID-19 перед визитом ВОЗ", 6 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/who-show/>; TIHR, "Жителям Ашхабада раздают противовирусные таблетки, а в Туркменабате дезинфицируют улицы", 30 June 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/who-is-nigh/>; TIHR, "Жители Ашхабада носят маски, но не соблюдают дистанцию. Планируется закрыть передвижение между этрапами и веляятам", 14 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/anti-covid-19-measures/>; Radio Azatlyk, "Эксперты ВОЗ в Туркменистане, в больницы продолжают поступать больные с симптомами COVID-19", 7 July 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30711195.html>; "Все что угодно, только не коронавирус. В Туркменистане введены жесткие меры, но COVID-19 не признают", 14 July 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30725228.html>

⁴⁰ TIHR, "В Туркменистане больных коронавирусом спрячут от миссии ВОЗ в отдаленных больницах", 27 April 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/cover-up/>

⁴¹ Radio Azatlyk, "Эксперты ВОЗ в Туркменистане, в больницы продолжают поступать больные с симптомами COVID-19", 7 July 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30711195.html>

⁴² TIHR, " Больницы Туркменабата работают в авральном режиме из-за визита миссии ВОЗ", 9 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/revizor/>

⁴³ TIHR, " ВОЗ: Правительству Туркменистана надо вести себя так, словно коронавирус уже в стране", 15 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/who-briefing/>

⁴⁴ "Эксперты ВОЗ: Туркменистан должен быть готов к COVID-19", 15 July 2020, <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2020/07/1382091>

⁴⁵ TIHR, "ВОЗ: Правительству Туркменистана надо вести себя так, словно коронавирус уже в стране", 15 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/who-briefing/>

While applauding the government’s capacity and preparedness to deal with Covid-19, the WHO mission also expressed concerns. In particular, the experts said that they were “extremely concerned about the many reports of an increasing number of acute respiratory infections or pneumonia of unknown origin”. They called on the authorities to “take the same measures as in those countries where the virus has begun to spread”, including by identifying people with acute respiratory infections, isolating and testing them, tracing their contacts, and treating patients. In addition to stepping up oversight and testing, the mission recommended the authorities to send the test samples taken to the WHO for retesting. The experts also stressed the importance of education and protection of medical workers, as well as of informing citizens about the Covid-19 situation and issuing “clear and understandable” recommendations with respect to Covid-19 protection. The experts stated that they expect the WHO to be informed about “any unexpected or unusual public health events” in the country “regardless of their nature or source”.⁴⁶

Failure to inform citizens, promote protection

At an early stage of the global Covid-19 pandemic, the authorities made some efforts to raise public awareness about the Coronavirus and how to avoid being infected. Among others, a brochure containing such information was distributed at schools, hospitals and workplaces⁴⁷, and information sheets for visitors was displayed at shopping centres and other public places.⁴⁸ However, these efforts waned as the authorities refocused attention on preventing discussion about the Coronavirus and concealing such cases in the country. As part of this trend, the authorities also discouraged the use of the term “Coronavirus”. For example, the information brochure mentioned was replaced by a new version that had no mentioning of the Coronavirus but instead spoke about “acute respiratory infectious diseases” in general.⁴⁹

Moreover, the authorities’ approach to Covid-19 preventive measures such as the use of face masks has been confusing and conflicting. During the first few months of the global Covid-19 pandemic, the authorities discouraged the use of face masks in public, allegedly to “prevent panic”, with law enforcement authorities reportedly stopping, intimidating and fining individuals who wore masks.⁵⁰ This is one case that TIHR learned about:

⁴⁶ “Эксперты ВОЗ: Туркменистан должен быть готов к COVID-19”, 15 July 2020, <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2020/07/1382091>

⁴⁷ Radio Azatlyk, “В Туркменистане раздают буклеты, информирующие об опасности коронавируса, прибывших из Китая помещают в карантин”, 10 February 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30426223.html>

⁴⁸ TIHR, “В Ашхабаде посетителям общественных мест обрабатывают руки антисептиком”, 28 March 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/03/hand-sanitizer/>

⁴⁹ Radio Azatlyk, “В Туркменистане раздают буклеты, информирующие об опасности коронавируса, прибывших из Китая помещают в карантин”, 10 February 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30426223.html>; TIHR, “Из буклетов, которые распространяет Минздрав исчезло упоминание коронавируса”, 17 March 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/03/no-coronavirus-brochure/>

⁵⁰ Radio Azatlyk, “Миссии ВОЗ показали клиники Туркменабада, в Ашхабаде новые заболевшие пневмонией”, 9 July 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30715616.html>; “В школах и детсадах Туркменистана тестируют на COVID-19”, 10 April 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30545596.html>

- In late February 2020, police detained a woman in Ashgabat for wearing a face mask, asking her if she “didn’t trust” the public health measures taken by the government and telling her that people wearing masks “create panic”. She was fined before being released.⁵¹

However, several months later, the authorities cardinaly changed their approach. In connection with the WHO mission to the country, when the reports of independent sources suggested that a widening Covid-19 outbreak was unfolding, the authorities first enforced the use of face masks among public sector employees (see more above) and later also among common residents. In mid-July 2020, the Ministry of Health “highly recommended” all residents to wear face masks, and law enforcement authorities started monitoring the use of masks in Ashgabat and other cities.⁵² TIHR’s correspondents reported that a growing number of police officers, moving around on foot, by bicycle and by car, were supervising that citizens complied with the new guidelines in the capital. Police offered those who did not have masks to buy one from them and warned residents that the refusal to wear masks may result in fines. Traffic police also checked that those travelling by car and bus were wearing masks and made passengers without masks leave buses.⁵³ According to Turkmen News, a police car with flashing lights blasted out loudspeaker messages informing citizens about the requirement to wear masks when leaving their homes.⁵⁴ The new requirement resulted in a deficit of face masks in many places, with people standing in line outside pharmacies to buy masks, sold at a set number per customer⁵⁵, and family members reportedly sharing masks.⁵⁶ The price of face masks was reported to have increased to as much as 17 TMT (some 4 EUR) per piece.⁵⁷

While enforcing the new requirement to wear face masks, the authorities did not explain the real purpose of it. The Ministry of Health justified its recommendation by claiming that an increased level of dust had been detected in the air throughout the country, saying this was “unfavourable” for the health of citizens, “primarily the respiratory system” and that using masks was aimed at preventing “adverse effects of climatic conditions on the body”.⁵⁸ The Ministry did not mention the Coronavirus.

With reference to the allegedly negative climatic conditions, the Ministry of Health also recommended maintaining a “safe distance” of at least 1 metre from other people in public places, as well as observing “rules of personal and public hygiene”.⁵⁹ According to TIHR’s information, residents in Ashgabat did not appear to comply with this guideline in the first few days after it was issued, with large crowds of people

⁵¹ TIHR, “Полиция оштрафовала жительницу Ашхабада, которая была в маске”, 26 February 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/02/no-panic/>

⁵² See Ministry of Health communications from 12 and 13 July 2020: <http://tdh.gov.tm/news/en/articles.aspx&article23498&cat15>; <http://tdh.gov.tm/news/en/articles.aspx&article23501&cat15>

⁵³ TIHR, “Жители Ашхабада носят маски, но не соблюдают дистанцию. Планируется закрыть передвижение между этрапами и веляятами”, 14 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/anti-covid-19-measures/>

⁵⁴ Turkmen News, “В Туркменистане введен масочный режим, закрыта «Толкучка», ТЦ «Беркарар», 13 July 2020, <https://turkmen.news/news/v-turkmenistane-vveden-masochnyj-rezhim-zakryta-tolkuchka-berkarar/>

⁵⁵ TIHR, “COVID-19: В Ашхабаде от пневмонии скончалась врач, а в аптеках выстроились очереди за масками”, 13 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/covid-victim/>

⁵⁶ Radio Azatlyk, “В Туркменистане началось тотальное ношение масок”, 14 July 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30724416.html>

⁵⁷ Radio Azatlyk, “Все что угодно, только не коронавирус. В Туркменистане введены жесткие меры, но COVID-19 не признают”, 14 July 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30725228.html>

⁵⁸ See Ministry of Health communications from 12 and 13 July 2020: <http://tdh.gov.tm/news/en/articles.aspx&article23498&cat15>; <http://tdh.gov.tm/news/en/articles.aspx&article23501&cat15>

⁵⁹ Turkmenistan Today, “Минздравмедпром настоятельно рекомендует пользоваться средствами индивидуальной защиты верхних дыхательных путей”, 12 July 2020, <http://tdh.gov.tm/news/en/articles.aspx&article23498&cat15>

being seen standing at public transportation stops, and in line outside stores and ATMs.⁶⁰ However, police did not appear to enforce this guideline in the same way as the one on using face masks.

Discussion about Covid-19 stifled, medical workers intimidated

National media outlets, which are controlled by the state, have provided limited coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic and have only communicated state-endorsed messages on this topic. Thus, their coverage has largely focused on hailing the measures taken by the government to prevent the Coronavirus from appearing and spreading in Turkmenistan. For example, a letter describing the preventive measures taken in the country, which the government sent to the UN in May 2020, was portrayed as a “significant example of Turkmenistan’s contribution to international efforts to combat the spread of COVID-19” and as “evidence of the recognition and high authority that Turkmenistan enjoys in the world arena”.⁶¹ In July 2020, as there was growing evidence of a worsening Covid-19 pandemic in the country (see more above), state TV spoke about the government’s “successful” policy of preventing Covid-19 and its readiness to expand international cooperation in this area.⁶² In July 2020, as the authorities started enforcing preventive measures, such as the use of face masks, state media highlighted these measures without referring to the Covid-19 pandemic.⁶³ State media also referred to several government action plans adopted by the government in relation to the pandemic, without detailing on the measures set out in those documents.⁶⁴

For the purported purpose of “preventing panic” in relation to the global pandemic, the authorities have sought to stifle discussion among residents, including medical workers about Covid-19. At the end of March 2020, Radio Azatlyk reported that plain clothed law enforcement officials were listening in on discussions among residents at bus stops and in other public places and detaining people who were speaking about the Coronavirus, with some of these people being locked up for 10 days.⁶⁵ The following month the service reported that the Ministry of Health had demanded that high-level managers at medical facilities ensure that there is no discussion about the Coronavirus among their staff. According

⁶⁰ TIHR, “Жители Ашхабада носят маски, но не соблюдают дистанцию. Планируется закрыть передвижение между этрапами и веляятами”, 14 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/anti-covid-19-measures/>

⁶¹ TIHR, “Туркменистан рассказал ООН об ограничениях на въезд в приграничные районы и других мерах борьбы с COVID-19”, 24 May 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/un-letter/>; “МИД Туркменистана распространил пресс-релиз по противодействию COVID-19”, 8 July 2020, <https://turkmenportal.com/blog/28706/mid-turkmenistana-rasprostranil-pressreliz-po-protivodeistviyu-covid19>

⁶² Radio Azatlyk, “Миссии ВОЗ показали клиники Туркменабада, в Ашхабаде новые заболевшие пневмонией”, 9 July 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30715616.html>

⁶³ TIHR, “По ТВ показывают, как правильно носить медицинские маски, но не объясняют зачем”, 9 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/no-reason/>; Radio Azatlyk, “В Туркменистане началось тотальное ношение масок”, 14 July 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30724416.html>

⁶⁴ See, for example, this TIHR report about state media coverage of the adoption of government action plan: “Бердымухамедов одобрил План противодействия Туркменистана COVID-19”, 16 May 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/antivirus-measures-2/>

⁶⁵ Radio Azatlyk, “В Туркменистане задерживают за разговоры о коронавирусе, граждане за пределами страны не могут вернуться домой”, 26 March 2020; <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30510309.html>; Radio Azatlyk, “Аресты за упоминание коронавируса, изоляция, отсутствие продуктов.COVID-19 и Туркменистан”, 2 April 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30525059.html>

to the service, the ministry demanded that the managers identify staff members who violate this informal ban and make them shut up, if necessary by putting pressure on them through their family members.⁶⁶

As already covered above, doctors told the Rights and Freedoms NGO about being pressured to conceal cases indicative of Covid-19.⁶⁷ This NGO also reported receiving information that medical professionals, based in different regions of the country, were prohibited from using their phones at work in what appeared to be an attempt to prevent them from documenting Covid-19 cases.⁶⁸ TIHR's monitors in the country documented the following case involving a doctor treating possibly Covid-19 infected individuals:

- In mid-April 2020, a doctor working in the Turkmenabat-located quarantine zone was detained by security services after being found to have his cell phone in his pocket during his shift, in violation of staff rules in place in the zone. For two days, he was held for questioning at the local department of the Ministry of National Security (MNS) before being released. Accused of being negligent and violating confidentiality requirements, he was temporarily suspended from his work, while the MNS continued to investigate his case. The MNS confiscated his phone for the duration of the investigation, reportedly warning him that he “may be held criminally responsible” if they find out that he has transferred information, photos or videos to foreign media. The MNS also questioned his wife.⁶⁹ A few days later, TIHR learned that the doctor had been allowed to resume his work and that his cell phone had been returned to him.⁷⁰

Radio Azatlyk reported that doctors and other staff working at the Ashgabat Centre for the Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases were not allowed to leave this institution or use their phones during an at least 14 day long quarantine, which was enforced in June 2020 in the context of the increasing number of pneumonia cases (see more above).⁷¹ In a similar vein, TIHR learned in July 2020 that medical staff at another, newly established Ashgabat hospital treating pneumonia patients had been prohibited from leaving their place of work as part of quarantine arrangements there. A person who underwent treatment at this facility said that a nurse had told her that she was not allowed to go home for a month.⁷²

In a trend seen already prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the authorities have sought to impede the work of independent, Turkmenistan-covering outlets based abroad by blocking their websites and disseminating propaganda aimed at discrediting them. In an example of such propaganda seen during the current pandemic, an article that appeared on the pro-government Gundogar News site on 28 March 2020 accused the Turkmen service of RFE/RL of publishing “fake news” about Covid-19 cases

⁶⁶ Radio Azatlyk, “Туркменским медработникам запрещают говорить о COVID-19, требуют сообщать об успехах и преследовать недовольных”, 9 April 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30543511.html>

⁶⁷ Rights and Freedoms, “Amid The Global COVID-19 Pandemic, Turkmenistan Continues To Deny The Existence Of The Coronavirus Cases In The Country”, 4 May 2020, <https://turkmenyurt.tv/en/amid-the-global-covid-19-pandemic-turkmenistan-continues-to-deny-the-existence-of-the-coronavirus-cases-in-the-country/>

⁶⁸ Rights and Freedoms, “The Modern Realities Of Medicine In Turkmenistan, And The Global COVID-19 Pandemic”, May 2020, <https://turkmenyurt.tv/en/the-modern-realities-of-medicine-in-turkmenistan-and-the-global-covid-19-pandemic/>

⁶⁹ TIHR, “В Туркменабате допросили врача, у которого нашли мобильный при входе в карантин”, 17 April 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/mobile/>

⁷⁰ TIHR, “К работе вернулся врач, которого задержали за наличие телефона в карантинной зоне Туркменабата”, 22 April 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/released/>

⁷¹ Radio Azatlyk, “В Туркменистане на фоне вспышки пневмонии есть смертельные случаи среди врачей”, 16 June 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30673339.html>

⁷² TIHR, “Пациентка ашхабадского стационара рассказала об условиях содержания в карантине”, 12 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/quarantine-2/>

in Turkmenistan.⁷³ In another example documented by TIHR, law enforcement officials warned local residents about “false” foreign media reports on the worsening shortages of basic food items sold in state stores during the pandemic (see more below). TIHR has also observed renewed attempts to interfere with the operation of its website, which it believes have been initiated by the Turkmenistani security services because of its coverage of Covid-19 related and other recent developments. Similar to other independent Turkmenistan-covering websites, TIHR’s website is only accessible to people living in Turkmenistan with the help of censorship circumvention tools such as VPNs (Virtual Private Networks). In addition, there have been reports about growing pressure on individuals accused of contributing information to independent outlets⁷⁴, as well as on activists using social media and other platforms to speak out against the government both in- and outside the country.⁷⁵

The authorities have also responded with hostility to statements made by representatives of the international community containing criticism of the government’s policy during the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, the Foreign Ministry denounced a health alert published by the US embassy in Ashgabat on 23 June 2020 as “distorted”, “biased” and “fake”.⁷⁶ In this alert, the embassy stated that it had “received reports of local citizens with symptoms consistent with COVID-19” and that “citizens who undergo testing for COVID-19 in Turkmenistan may be sent to involuntary quarantine at a government-selected facility at their own expense with no control over the amenities for an unspecified period of time”.⁷⁷ On the contrary, the government has been happy to quote representatives of the diplomatic community in the country who have backed up its policy in relation to Covid-19, such as the Russian ambassador in Turkmenistan. In a statement made on 11 June 2020, the Russian ambassador expressed confidence in the official information about the absence of the Coronavirus in the country.⁷⁸ A month later, however, TIHR learned that the consular section of the Russian embassy had stopped receiving visitors - apparently due to concerns about Covid-19, even if the embassy did not say so.⁷⁹

⁷³ See http://gundogar-news.com/index.php?category_id=11&news_id=15350

⁷⁴ For more information on this issue, see IPHR-TIHR update on fundamental freedoms in Turkmenistan published in June 2020, <https://www.iphronline.org/turkmenistan-government-responds-to-covid-19-and-hurricane-with-denial-cover-ups-and-intimidation-tactics.html>

⁷⁵ See more in joint statement issued by a group of Turkmenistani and foreign human rights defenders: “Stop Persecution of Turkmen Civic Activists!”, 24 July 2020, <https://en.hronikatm.com/2020/07/stop-persecution-of-turkmen-civic-activists/>; as well as the following TIHR alert: “Спецслужбы Туркменистана усилили контроль за правозащитницей перед днем рождения Бердымухамедова”, 25 June 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/shabunts/>

⁷⁶ TIHR, “МИД Туркменистана возмущен заявлением посольства США о принудительном карантине туркменских граждан”, 23 June 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/mid-turkmenistana-vozmushhen-zayavleniem-posolstva-ssha-o-prinuditelnom-karantine-turkmenskih-grazhdan/>

⁷⁷ “Health Alert: U.S. Embassy Ashgabat, Turkmenistan (June 23, 2020)”, at <https://tm.usembassy.gov/health-alert-u-s-embassy-ashgabat-turkmenistan-june-23-2020/>

⁷⁸ TIHR, “Посол РФ А.Блохин рассказал, что в Туркменистане нет ни вируса, ни голода”, 12 June 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/blokhin/>

⁷⁹ TIHR, “Посольство России в Ашхабаде приостанавливает прием посетителей”, 19 July 2020 <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/rus-embassy/>

Questionable tactics

The authorities have at times resorted to questionable tactics in the fight against Covid-19. For example, there have been reports about the body temperature of residents being measured at road and other checkpoints,⁸⁰ with those found to have an elevated temperature risking to be forcibly placed in quarantine.⁸¹ As covered above, the US embassy in Ashgabat has also raised concerns about the arbitrary approach to subjecting residents to quarantine. Adding to these concerns, there have been reports about harsh quarantine conditions, especially in specifically established quarantine zones. On 1 April 2020, TIHR published a video from a quarantine zone in Turkmenabat, where residents who had returned from abroad were being held for two weeks. The conditions in this zone were more reminiscent of a campsite for tourists than a medical facility, with people being accommodated in tents. People staying there complained about insufficient heating at night, as a result of which many slept in their coats.⁸² In mid-April, TIHR learned that seven people had tested positively for Covid-19 in the zone and were being held in a separate tent.⁸³ When a devastating hurricane hit the Lebap region at the end of April, the tent zone was destroyed but was later rebuilt and re-equipped.⁸⁴

Another questionable measure was seen when, starting in May 2020, public sector employees were being made to undergo compulsory medical checkups at their own cost⁸⁵, with the heads of such institutions reportedly threatening that those refusing to comply may be dismissed. The authorities did not explain the reason for the checkups, but several sources with whom TIHR's correspondents spoke suggested that they were aimed at creating the impression that the authorities were effectively fighting Covid-19 ahead of the visit of the WHO mission to the country (see more about the mission above).⁸⁶ Several people who had been checked up said that they had not been properly examined before receiving the required documentation proving that they had passed the checkups.⁸⁷

⁸⁰ TIHR, "Полицейские на пунктах инфекционной проверки игнорируют нарушения правил перевозки людей", 2 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/checkpoint/>; TIHR, "У Ашхабада появились палатки, где замеряют температуру у въезжающих в город", 21 May 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/ashgabat-entry-tests/>; Radio Azatlyk, "Власти Туркменистана заявили об отсутствии COVID-19 и готовности поделится опытом, а население принудительно помещают в карантин", 23 July 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30571830.html>

⁸¹ Radio Azatlyk, "Власти Туркменистана заявили об отсутствии COVID-19 и готовности поделится опытом, а население принудительно помещают в карантин", 23 April 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30571830.html>

⁸² TIHR, "Прибывающие из-за рубежа граждане должны пройти двухнедельный карантин в Туркменабате (видео)", 1 April 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/two-weeks-quarantine/>

⁸³ TIHR, "В Туркменистане обнаружены как минимум семь человек с коронавирусом", 14 April 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/seven-infected/>

⁸⁴ TIHR, "В Туркменистане обнаружены как минимум семь человек с коронавирусом", 14 April 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/quarantine-rebuilt/>

⁸⁵ See Radio Azatlyk, "Туркменистан обследует своих граждан за их собственный счет и снова открывает закрытые населенные пункты", 9 June 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30660719.html>; TIHR, "В Ашхабаде бюджетников продолжают отправлять на формальные медосмотры", 13 June 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/check-ups/>

⁸⁶ TIHR, "В Ашхабаде бюджетников продолжают отправлять на формальные медосмотры", 13 June 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/check-ups/>

⁸⁷ Radio Azatlyk, "Туркменистан обследует своих граждан за их собственный счет и снова открывает закрытые населенные пункты", 9 June 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30660719.html>; TIHR, "В Ашхабаде бюджетников продолжают отправлять на формальные медосмотры", 13 June 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/check-ups/>

After the authorities suggested that viruses might be carried by “air currents” in mid-July 2020 (see more above), TIHR learned about airplane operations to spray disinfecting solutions over several border regions in Turkmenistan. The stated purpose of this measure was to “kill pathogenic microorganisms in the air”.⁸⁸ However, the fact that the operations were carried out at low height “near settlements” gave rise to questions about the potential negative health effects for residents.

While the authorities have failed to adequately inform residents about Covid-19 and to systematically promote protective measures (see more above), they have resorted to controversial preventive strategies, such as burning incense of wild rue – a traditional medical herb – in public institutions following the president’s recommendation⁸⁹ and handing out anti-virus drugs without any proven effect.⁹⁰

Students returning home because of COVID-19 face internet access problems

Elementary schools and other educational institutions in Turkmenistan operated as usual until the end of the school 2019-2020 year, although spring holidays were extended by one week at the beginning of April 2020 as a preventive measure in view of the Covid-19 pandemic⁹¹. At an early stage of the pandemic, the authorities organised chartered flights to bring home citizens – including students – from China, Turkey, Russia and other countries.⁹² While the authorities stated that the students who returned to Turkmenistan continued their studies online, the poor internet connections in the country created difficulties for them to participate in online classes and complete assignments.⁹³ Internet access is expensive and slow in Turkmenistan compared to global standards. The price level is illustrated by the fact that the cheapest unlimited, fixed internet connection offered by the state Turkmen Telekom provider comes at a monthly cost of 150 manat (some 40 EUR, or about 10 percent of the average salary).⁹⁴ As for internet speed, the Speedtest Global Index has given Turkmenistan a bottom rating in terms of the speed of fixed broadband connections worldwide.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ TIHR, “ВОЗ проводит брифинг по итогам визита в Туркменистан, а для дезинфекции воздуха начали применять кукурузники”, 15 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/dust-luftwaffe/>

⁸⁹ TIHR, “Туркменские СМИ стали массово писать о пользе гармалы и лапши с перцем”, 17 March 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/03/harmala-antivirus/>; Global Voices, “Turkmenistan fights coronavirus with (more) isolation and herbal remedies”, 18 March 2020, <https://globalvoices.org/2020/03/18/turkmenistan-fights-coronavirus-with-more-isolation-and-herbal-remedies/>

⁹⁰ TIHR, “Жителям Ашхабада раздают противовирусные таблетки, а в Туркменабате дезинфицируют улицы”, 30 June 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/who-is-nigh/>; Turkmen News, “COVID-19. Так есть или нет коронавирус в Туркменистане?”, 29 June 2020, <https://turkmen.news/news/covid-19-v-turkmenistane/>

⁹¹ “Туркменистан продлил школьные каникулы до 6 апреля”, 30 March 2020, <https://turkmenportal.com/blog/26387/turkmenistan-prodlil-shkolnye-kanikuly-do-6-aprelya>

⁹² Radio Azatlyk, “В Туркменистане задерживают за разговоры о коронавирусе, граждане за пределами страны не могут вернуться домой”, 26 March 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30510309.html>

⁹³ Radio Azatlyk, “Студенты китайских вузов, вернувшиеся из-за коронавируса в Туркменистан, испытывают трудности с дистанционным обучением”, 21 March 2020, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30500999.html>

⁹⁴ See <https://telecom.tm/ru/internet>

⁹⁵ In June 2020, Turkmenistan was ranked second last, in earlier months, it had been ranked last. See <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index>

Mass events instead of social distancing

At the beginning of the global Covid-19 pandemic, the Turkmenistani authorities did not promote social distancing among residents or provide any guidelines on the safe conduct of large gatherings in the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic. On the contrary, as the pandemic was spreading across the world, the authorities continued organising celebrative mass events. In a highly problematic practice seen for years, the authorities forcibly mobilise state employees, students and other residents to participate in such events at the threat of repercussions.

For example, mass Novruz spring holiday festivities were held across Turkmenistan on 23 March 2020. Only in the capital Ashgabat, hundreds of employees at state educational, cultural and arts institutions were mobilised to participate in these festivities, with rehearsals starting in mid-March.⁹⁶ In another example, a biking race was organised in the capital on 3 June 2020, with students being mobilised en masse to complete the 12 kilometre long race led by the president on the occasion of World Biking Day.⁹⁷

As covered above, in connection with the WHO mission to the country in July 2020, the Ministry of Health issued a recommendation for social distancing, without explaining its real purpose. At this time, TIHR also learned about the postponement of a planned mass event “for technical reasons”, but it was not clear whether this was part of a broader trend concerning such events.⁹⁸ When announcing its findings, the WHO mission said it was pleased with the measures taken to prevent respiratory infections during mass events but it did not detail on these measures.⁹⁹

Worsening shortages of basic food items at state-subsidised prices

In the last few years, Turkmenistan has experienced a protracted economic crisis, which has, among others, featured shortages of major food staples at affordable prices. Thus, basic food items such as flour, bread, egg and oil have regularly been scarce in availability at state-run stores selling food at state-subsidised prices,¹⁰⁰ resulting in rationing.¹⁰¹ The same food items have mostly been available through private retailers, but at prices several times higher.¹⁰² The shortages of major food staples at state-run stores have recently deteriorated further and appear to have been exacerbated by the restrictions on movements within the country, as well as across its borders that the authorities imposed in the context

⁹⁶ TIHR, “Пока страны ЦА отменяют массовые мероприятия, Туркменистан готовится к субботнику и Новрузу”, 17 March 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/03/v-domike/>

⁹⁷ TIHR, “Во Всемирный день велосипеда в Ашхабаде открыли монумент и перекрыли дороги”, 3 June 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/bicycle-day/>

⁹⁸ TIHR, “В Ашхабаде отменили показ мод «по техническим причинам»”, 7 July 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/07/fashion-show-postponed/>

⁹⁹ “Эксперты ВОЗ: Туркменистан должен быть готов к COVID-19”, 15 July 2020, <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2020/07/1382091>

¹⁰⁰ TIHR, “Посол РФ А.Блохин рассказал, что в Туркменистане нет ни вируса, ни голода”, 12 June 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/blokhin/>

¹⁰¹ TIHR, “В городе Туркменбаша ввели продажу продуктов по карточкам”, 11 June 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/ration-cards/>

¹⁰² TIHR, “Посол РФ А.Блохин рассказал, что в Туркменистане нет ни вируса, ни голода”, 12 June 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/blokhin/>

of the global Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁰³ This has sparked some rare, public protests by citizens venting their frustration at the decreasing availability of flour and other basic necessities. Several protests were reported in spring 2020, with the authorities seeking to quell the protests using both persuasion (such as by handing out sacks of flours to the participants) and intimidation (such as through the brief detention of protestors and threats).¹⁰⁴

State media have reported about government discussions about the impact of the global Covid-19 pandemic on the socio-economic situation in the country, as well about the adoption of a government action plan in this context, without, however, providing any details about measures to be taken.¹⁰⁵ The government has previously denied that there currently is any economic crisis in the country, but on 8 May 2020, the president warned that the recent sharp decline in oil prices – which has been seen in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic – might bring about an “unfavourable” situation in the country.¹⁰⁶

Local officials have blamed shortages of basic staples at state-run stores on the Covid-19 pandemic, without mentioning that the economic crisis began long before this. In a case documented by TIHR's monitors, high-ranking officials gathered local elders in the Lebap region on 29 February 2020 to assure them that the government was “working hard” to solve these problems, saying that they were “temporary” and caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Law enforcement officials present also reportedly warned the participants about foreign media and social media reports that contain “false, slanderous information defaming the country”, saying that residents who disseminate such information will be “held strictly liable”.¹⁰⁷

Calls to release prisoners held on politically motivated grounds

The Turkmenistani authorities continue to use politically motivated imprisonment as a tool of retaliation against individuals critical of the government. While Turkmenistan's prison system is closed to independent monitors, available information indicates that the treatment of such prisoners is particularly harsh, and dozens of individuals imprisoned following politically motivated and charged trials have disappeared in prison.¹⁰⁸ Overcrowding, widespread tuberculosis and lack of access to medical assistance are common problems within the prison system.¹⁰⁹ Against this background, there are serious reasons to fear for the health, well-being and lives of prisoners, especially those held on politically motivated grounds should Covid-19 spread to prisons.

¹⁰³ See more in RFE/RL, “Turkmenistan Quells Food-Shortage Protest With Bags Of Flour”, 4 April 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-quells-food-shortage-protest-with-bags-of-flour/30530360.html>; Fergana News, “Coronavirus restrictions exacerbate food shortages in Turkmenistan”, 3 April 2020, <https://en.fergana.ru/news/116754/>

¹⁰⁴ See more in IPHR-TIHR briefing paper on key human rights trends in Turkmenistan published in June 2020, <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/TM-briefing-paper-June-2020.pdf>

¹⁰⁵ TIHR, “В МИД обсудили влияние COVID-19 на экономику Туркменистана”, 15 May 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/covid-economy/>

¹⁰⁶ TIHR, “В МИД обсудили влияние COVID-19 на экономику Туркменистана”, 15 May 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/covid-economy/>

¹⁰⁷ TIHR, “Старейшинам Туркменистана объяснили причины дефицита продуктов и призвали не верить «лживым» СМИ”, 1 March 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/03/deficit-causes/>

¹⁰⁸ Prove They Are Alive, “Updated list of the victims of enforced disappearances”, 16 September 2020, <https://provetheyarealive.org/updated-list-of-the-victims-of-enforced-disappearances/>

¹⁰⁹ For more information, see IPHR-TIHR briefing paper published in April 2017, at <https://iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/TIHR-and-IPHR-briefing-paper-for-EU-Turkmenistan-HR-dialogue-2017.pdf>.

At the of June 2020, a group of US senators wrote to President Berdymukhamedov to request the release of individuals held in detention for peacefully exercising their rights of freedom of association, assembly and speech. The senators said that they called for the release of these individuals “on the merits of their cases” but also urged the president to “act quickly on health and humanitarian grounds”, noting that risks faced by detainees are “particularly acute” at the time of the global Covid-19 pandemic.¹¹⁰ The senators raised in particular the cases of Omruzak Omarkulyev, Gulgeldy Annaniyazov, and Mansur Mingelov. Omarkulyev is believed to have received a lengthy prison sentence in 2018 after founding a Turkmenistani student group in Turkey¹¹¹, and Mingelov is serving a 22-year sentence on drug and other charges handed to him in 2012 after he complained about torture in police detention.¹¹² Annaniyazov is a dissident who was imprisoned in 2008 after returning to Turkmenistan from exile. He was due to be released in March 2019 but had had five more years added to his sentence shortly before this.¹¹³

International human rights bodies and experts have also called on states to release vulnerable categories of prisoners during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet has urged governments to examine ways to release those at most risk of Covid-19, such as older people and those who are sick, and has stressed: “Now, more than ever, governments should release every person detained without sufficient legal basis, including political prisoners”.¹¹⁴

Recommendations

In view of the developments described above, we would like to make the following recommendations to the authorities of Turkmenistan:

- Put an end to the policy of denial and cover-up in relation to Covid-19, acknowledge the current public health crisis in the country and take adequate measures to safeguard public health at this time, in compliance with Turkmenistan’s international human rights obligations;
- Implement the recommendations made by the WHO expert team who visited Turkmenistan in July 2020;
- Refrain from pressuring medical professionals to conceal Covid-19 cases and ensure that they have ready access to Covid-19 tests and can make proper diagnoses and prescribe relevant treatment for Covid-19 inflicted conditions;
- Register and report all cases of confirmed Covid-19 infections, as well as cases of death due to Covid-19;
- Enforce adequate safety protocols for the examination and treatment of Covid-19 suspected patients and ensure that all medical staff caring for such patients have adequate protective equipment;

¹¹⁰ The letter, dated 29 June 2020, is available at: <https://www.hronikatm.com/wp-content/uploads/06-29-20-rm-letter-to-turkmenistan-president-re-political-prisoners.pdf>

¹¹¹ See more in IPHR-TIHR briefing paper on key human rights trends in Turkmenistan published in June 2020, <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/TM-briefing-paper-June-2020.pdf>

¹¹² See more about his case in Amnesty International Urgent Action published on 12 July 2018, at <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR6187832018ENGLISH.pdf>

¹¹³ See more in IPHR-TIHR briefing paper on key human rights trends in Turkmenistan published in June 2020, <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/TM-briefing-paper-June-2020.pdf>

¹¹⁴ “Urgent action needed to prevent COVID-19 “rampaging through places of detention” – Bachelet”, 25 March 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25745&LangID=E>

- Promote public awareness of Covid-19 and protective measures in a systematic and transparent way and ensure that no one is intimidated or harassed for documenting, sharing and discussing information on Covid-19 related issues;
- Take effective measures to promote internet access, speed and affordability, especially at this time of increasing demand for online communication;
- Refrain from forcibly mass mobilising citizens for state-organised mass events – both at this time of public health crisis and beyond it; and
- Protect prisoners against Covid-19 and grant them access to appropriate hygiene, screening and medical assistance, and release those held behind bars in retaliation for their peaceful exercise of fundamental freedoms.