

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

All about coronavirus in Turkmenistan,
though officially the country has no COVID-19 infections



 **turkmen.news**

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FOREWORD

Since COVID-19 first began to spread around the world the government of Turkmenistan has taken an unambiguous stance: the virus has not reached the country. At the start of the hot summer of 2020 when the infection wards of the local hospitals were overcrowded with pneumonia patients and people started dying, the authorities opened several additional hospitals. But even then, instead of acknowledging the presence of the virus in the country, the authorities spoke about microparticles of hazardous dust in the atmosphere.

Turkmen.news has written this report in order to describe the epidemiological situation in Turkmenistan between January 2020 and May 2021. We have drawn up a chronology of COVID-related events in the country on the basis of official publications, reports by foreign diplomats working in Turkmenistan, and information from our sources living in various parts of the country, some of whom are health workers.

During this period we were able to confirm conclusively the deaths of 55 citizens of Turkmenistan from an illness that has all the hallmarks of COVID-19 (see Appendix 1). They include 17 people (31%) who are connected in some way with medicine. In many cases the information was passed on directly by bereaved relatives, who are angered at the government's denial of the presence of the virus. The real death toll is without doubt greater.

For more than a year we closely followed developments: from the first attempts to deny the penetration of the infection to the partial lifting of quarantine measures and the start of vaccinations.

Throughout this time the authorities of Turkmenistan grappled with leaks in all kinds of ways. Monitoring the situation cost [Nurgeldi Halykov](#) his freedom – the 26-year-old resident of Ashgabat shared with turkmen.news a photo of the World Health Organization team on a mission to Turkmenistan. Halykov was sentenced to four years in prison on fabricated charges.

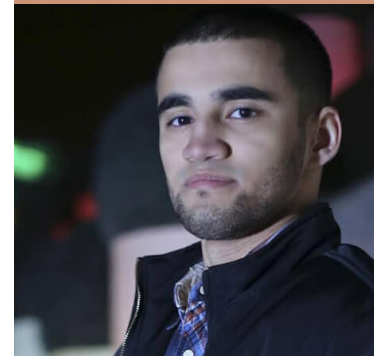
For two months from the time a WHO delegation was invited to Turkmenistan (May 5, 2020) until its actual arrival (July 6) the authorities instructed local doctors in what could be said and what could not, spruced up the hospitals, and swapped COVID patients for others with “minor” illnesses.

Relying on official information from the Turkmen authorities that there are no cases and, moreover, no fatalities, international organizations, including world financial institutions and foreign governments, risk taking incorrect political and economic decisions.

One of the key responsibilities of any state is to protect the health of its population.

Lacking the necessary information from doctors, people looked up treatment for their symptoms on the Internet, often relying on the opinions of others rather than scientifically grounded advice. Perhaps this report will help the bereaved to demand compensation from the Turkmen authorities for the loss of their loved ones and the damage to their own health.

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Nurgeldi Halykov

By depriving citizens of accurate information, the authorities of Turkmenistan practically put medicine on a par with veterinary care.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

IS THERE CORONAVIRUS IN TURKMENISTAN?

There are all the signs of coronavirus, but the government does not acknowledge it.

WHY DON'T THEY ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THE INFECTION IS PRESENT?

It's not the done thing in Turkmenistan to talk about serious problems, natural disasters or other misfortunes. The government thinks that any negative information damages the image of the country, which since independence has experienced a Decade of Well Being, a Golden Age, and an Epoch of Might and Happiness. So from the start the authorities covered up data about COVID-19 cases. When it emerged that coronavirus infections had been recorded in practically every country in the world, it was too late to turn back. It would be strange to deny the penetration of the infection now, while to acknowledge its presence would only confirm that Turkmenistan had spread false information for a year.

ARE THE AUTHORITIES DOING ANYTHING TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF INFECTION?

Yes, strict quarantine measures have been in place in the country since 2020, including the compulsory wearing of masks and closure of leisure facilities. But they forget about the danger of infection when they need to show celebratory events on TV. Ordinary citizens are able to pay bribes to get round the bans if they wish.

HOW ARE PATIENTS TREATED?

The information is contradictory. There are reports of poor quality and even dangerous treatment, and also of the right protocols being followed. It looks as though it all depends on luck, location, social status, and the ability to pay for treatment.

HOW DO THE OFFICIAL MEDIA REPORT THE PANDEMIC?

At the start of the pandemic the media hardly used the word COVID-19, and later replaced the name of an illness, pneumonia for example, with the words “infectious disease.” Myths are also used, such as the “harmful dust from the Aral Sea.” The media disseminate material based on science such as about precautionary measures, as well as dubious recommendations based on traditional folk medicine. After the WHO visit, TV broadcasts covered the need to wear masks and observe social distancing, while newspapers printed relevant information posters.

ARE VACCINATIONS BEING GIVEN IN THE COUNTRY?

Yes, in January 2021 two Russian vaccines were approved in Turkmenistan and one Chinese vaccine was supplied, though its approval was not officially reported in the media. Then independent sources reported the start of vaccinations of various categories of the population. No official reports are given about the vaccination process or the number of people jabbed.

HAS THE TURKMEN ECONOMY SUFFERED?

Yes, the coronavirus pandemic has deepened the economic crisis of the past few years. The role of the pandemic should not be exaggerated though, as the situation [was already woeful](#).

IN DETAIL

IS THERE CORONAVIRUS IN TURKMENISTAN?

From the very start of the pandemic, independent media received reports that infections had been found in Turkmenistan. Initially it was a matter of individual cases of infection, but it was difficult to confirm or deny the information. Turkmenistan is a closed country. Independent media have their editorial offices abroad while local correspondents work anonymously, risking persecution.

By July reports had piled up about the deaths of specific individuals, including, for example, Kemal Uckun, an adviser on religious affairs at the Turkish Embassy, who died on July 8. His body was sent home for burial, and in early 2021 his widow Guzide Uckun made a complaint against Turkish officials for failing to arrange the diplomat's prompt evacuation. His widow was present in the Turkmen hospital where they were trying to treat Kemal Uckun and has no doubt that COVID-19 caused his death. She sent his X-ray to three Turkish hospitals. All the doctors who saw the X-ray confirmed the diagnosis.

The Turkmen authorities traditionally ignore publications by independent media, but usually react very harshly to "untoward" statements by officials. The fact that the Turkmen Ministry of Foreign Affairs made no response at all to the comments of Guzide Uckun, Khristina Nestoyanova, and Hugh Philpott is indirect evidence that the authorities were simply unable to give a reasoned denial of reports about specific cases.



Guzide and Kemal Uckun

"They gave Kemal oxygen, injections, and pills. . . I have a full list of all the medications, including antibacterial, anti-fungal, anti-ulcer, and anti-inflammatory medications. It was a whole bunch of things. My husband deteriorated and his cough got worse too. He couldn't talk on the phone because of his problems breathing. He said that his lungs were burning. Towards the end he could no longer get out of bed. The death certificate gives pulmonary edema as the cause of death (fluid on the lungs — [turkmen.news](#)). — From [an interview](#) with Guzide Uckun

Kemal Uckun is of course not the only victim of coronavirus in Turkmenistan. Turkmen.news has been able to confirm with the same degree of certainty the deaths of another 54 people. The only difference is that the people who told us about these deaths are ordinary citizens of Turkmenistan and cannot act openly without fear of retribution. In July turkmen.news sources in Ashgabat and Turkmenbashi reported that white marquees where memorial ceremonies are held could be seen in every yard. "It's like a war zone," a source in Turkmenbashi said.

The Turkmen authorities later acknowledged the deaths of two senior officials which had been reported by turkmen.news: the president's oil and gas adviser Yagshigeldi Kakaev (who died on July 8, 2020) and the head of Farap district, Hasan Metkuliev (who died on July 18). Only in February 2021 did the president propose naming the oil and gas university after Kakaev, while Astanogly Seyidov was appointed Farap district head in place of Metkuliev on August 31. The media did not report the cause of Kakaev's death or what had happened to Metkuliev.



Yagshigeldi Kakaev

The majority of cases remain unknown to the independent media or cannot be fully confirmed, because in the current conditions in Turkmenistan it is difficult to find people who are prepared to speak about such "dangerous" issues, even anonymously.

In private conversations with turkmen.news, doctors in the country talked about "hundreds" of deaths from coronavirus.

On July 12, 2020, Khristina Nestoyanova, wife of Vladimir Nestoyanov, first secretary at the Russian Embassy in Ashgabat, wrote on Instagram that coronavirus had reached Turkmenistan, though the authorities denied it. In December 2020 the British ambassador to Turkmenistan, Hugh Stanley Philpott, tweeted that he had been ill with COVID-19. The next day the Russian deleted her post and all the comments on it.



Khristina Nestoyanova

"The virus is dictating its rules and changing our way of life. It has finally reached us too, surprising us with its scale. . . The border around the city has been shut for a long time. . . From today markets and shopping centers have started closing one after the other. Masks have been introduced. The supermarket where we do our shopping is still open. There are still 'no' confirmed cases of coronavirus. . . We realize that's not so. . . A great many people are sick. I really love this country. With all my heart. But I'm deeply disappointed that such measures are so long overdue. . . A Turkish diplomat, a presidential adviser, and lots of other people have died. But coronavirus is not acknowledged. And this is the terrible fact that distinguishes this country from all the others that acknowledge and treat the sick. We're caught in a trap. It's survival of the fittest. There's no treatment here."



Hugh Philpott ✓
@HughPhilpott

В ответ @RobinOrdSmith и @Peter__Leonard

I need to recuperate from covid, but deffo a challenge for 2021!

12:48 PM · 16 дек. 2020 г. · Twitter for iPad

WHY DON'T THEY ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THE INFECTION IS PRESENT?

This [is usual](#) for Turkmenistan. The authorities have been hiding the presence of HIV in the country for many years (officially, only two HIV cases have been recorded in the entire history of Turkmenistan). This means that as far as the state is concerned the infected “do not exist” and cannot expect antiretroviral therapy.

Turkmenistan President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov is a qualified doctor and used to work as a dentist. Perhaps he thinks that disclosing information about the presence of infectious diseases in the country will tarnish his image.

In spring at the very start of the pandemic two Central Asian countries opted to deny the presence of COVID-19: Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. In April Turkmenistan's minister of foreign affairs, Rashid Meredov, said that the country was ready to receive foreign experts and show the absence of coronavirus. The same day the WHO said it wished to visit Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. A week later, on April 30, the Tajik authorities announced the first infections. In early May a WHO mission visited Dushanbe where nothing was hidden from the delegation. The specialists were to have gone on to Turkmenistan, but for a long time the Turkmen authorities could not agree on the visit and it was postponed until July.

PLAYING HIDE AND SEEK WITH THE WHO

A day before the WHO mission arrived, ambulances took children from the children's infectious diseases hospital at city polyclinic No. 5 to a new infectious diseases hospital for adults. This is the hospital that received the foreign visitors the next day. The COVID patients who had been at the hospital were moved to an old regional hospital in Uchpunkt residential district, which is now a city hospital. Children with other infectious diseases were moved to a quarantine zone where they could have caught COVID. Moreover, the paramedics were not wearing protective clothing when they picked up the seriously ill pneumonia patients. When the WHO mission left, all the patients were returned to their hospitals.

In the end, in July a WHO mission was received in several hospitals, which had been specially prepared for the visit. The experts had no opportunity to make independent checks. In August the Turkmen authorities promised to allow WHO experts to conduct independent testing for COVID-19 but this promise was never kept.

In May the Turkmen authorities could still have followed Tajikistan's example and reported they had "just" discovered the first cases of infection without any reputational loss. By July this was already problematic. They would have had to report to officials that the virus spread to the country in early summer when everyone had already been warned about the dangers. This would have meant the failure of the quarantine work. But they could not say that the virus had been present in the country since the start of the pandemic, as this would mean admitting to having lied.

At present Turkmenistan and North Korea are the only states in the world with populations greater than one million to deny the presence of coronavirus. Information about COVID-19 is in a grey zone in Turkmenistan: everyone knows that the infection is in the country, but cannot talk about it openly. This is far from the only subject that cannot be spoken about openly in Turkmenistan. Statistics are hardly published, while the reliability of those that are disclosed is dubious; officials at every level can [spout rules and norms](#), which are not recorded in any legal document. Citizens are used to living without transparency.

Observers in Turkmenistan say that the country's economic problems are another reason for denying the presence of the infection. The government would have to pay benefits to people who lost work because of the virus or had to stay at home under strict quarantine.

At the end of 2020 a Turkmen citizen called Kemal who lives in Russia explained to experts from the Regional Expert Group on the Health of Migrants: "I'm HIV positive, and can live with this in Moscow, but not in Turkmenistan. This was confirmed when I flew home. I went to the AIDS center there, had a test, and was given a certificate to say I was in perfect health. All because in Turkmenistan they deny the presence of people with HIV. People can die, but no one will tell the truth."



WHO delegation in Ashgabat

ARE THE AUTHORITIES DOING ANYTHING TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF INFECTION?

As early as January 31, 2020 Turkmenistan closed its border with Uzbekistan. On February 1, 2020 Turkmenistan Airlines stopped flights to China and Thailand, and the borders with Iran and Afghanistan were closed. A quarantine camp for arrivals from abroad was set up in Lebap region.

In March all international flights were stopped and the first restrictions on travel between regions were introduced. Tents were set up at the entry points to all major towns and cities and police and doctors were on duty there. Students from the city's universities were sent to checkpoints on the roads into Ashgabat to take the temperatures of drivers and passengers, but had no protection, not even face masks. Moreover, it was forbidden to be afraid of the virus and people who wore masks risked punishment for "scaremongering." There were reports of people being fined for "spreading panic amongst the public."

In mid-May the authorities banned holidays in Turkmenistan's seaside resort Avaza. The ban has been in place for exactly one year.

QUARANTINE CONDITIONS

The quarantine camp is an enclosed area in the desert, where several army tents have been erected. The tents house 20 two-tier bunk beds which are not isolated from one another at all. New arrivals from abroad are mixed in with people who have completed the obligatory 14 day-stay and are about to go home (in November 2020 the quarantine period was extended to 21 days). In winter it was dusty and cold inside the tents with drafts coming in from all sides. The electric heaters could not cope. There is a separate wash tent with containers of water and plastic pipelines have been connected but the water is cold. The toilet and shower are outside.

The food is monotonous, mainly rice and porridge. All the cooked food comes in plastic dishes, which are thrown away together with the remains of the uneaten food. The quality of the food and drinking water is poor, if not terrible. There are small stones in the low-grade rice.



Quarantine camp near Turkmenabat

During their July trip WHO experts did not insist on visiting hospitals that had not been prepared for inspection, or on independent testing for COVID-19 or other measures that would have revealed infections. Instead the members of the mission simply recommended that the Turkmen authorities behave as though the virus were present in the country to be on the safe side.

After that, really strict quarantine measures were introduced in Turkmenistan. Travel between regions was almost completely stopped, many institutions were instructed to stop work, and fines began to be imposed for failing to wear a medical mask in a public place. The academic year began in schools with strict restrictions: classes were divided into two and children had to carry with them health packs with antiseptics.

The quarantine measures did not apply to the country's top leadership, though. TV reports showed government events where people, including the president, were not wearing masks. At the same time, in reports showing "ordinary" people (workers in factories, students in lecture halls, farm workers in fields) everyone was wearing a mask. The 63-year-old president often flew on working trips to the regions after people over 50 had been banned from travelling to another region.

Corruption also got in the way of quarantine. For example, several citizens bribed policemen and held forbidden family celebrations in the courtyards of their homes, while it was possible to take detours to reach other regions, often across the desert.

For many citizens, observing quarantine meant a loss of earnings. The authorities did not help businesses that had to stop work. So, many hairdressing salons, cafes, and other establishments worked illegally, while vendors from the closed markets began to visit institutions and offices ([including hospitals](#)) to sell in person.

QUARANTINE CONDITIONS

If you want something better, you can place orders for money with the nurses. Water is brought in and poured into an unwashed barrel, so the water stinks and there is a permanent cloud of midges above the tank and flies swimming inside. It's impossible to drink it or use it to make tea. But many people did drink tea made with this water, as they could not afford anything else.

People had their temperature taken every day, but no other medical tests were done. Elderly men and women with children were sent to the infectious diseases hospital in Turkmenabat instead of the camp.



Camp conditions

WHAT TREATMENT WAS GIVEN TO THE SICK?

Turkmen.news received a range of feedback on the work of Turkmen doctors. On the one hand, there were reports of ineffective, even dangerous, methods of treatment. On the other hand, in January 2021 a doctor working directly with coronavirus patients told turkmen.news that medics in the country had learnt how to treat the illness. He said the situation was under control and medications approved the world over were being purchased for patients. The doctor said that all the fatalities had been linked with late hospitalization.

He did not say why patients were being sent late to hospital. But we know of two reasons why citizens shy away from hospitals.

- One, the quality of medical services in Turkmenistan is uneven. It really is possible to receive effective treatment from individual specialists in some hospitals, but in others incidents occur similar to the one involving Major Gurbangulyev. When they know about these cases, people start to be afraid of doctors.
- Two, medical care in Turkmenistan is not free of charge. There is medical insurance in the country, but insurance only allows for a reduction in the cost of treatment. This sector is also very corrupt. Bribes are often demanded from patients' relatives for various procedures. Many people simply cannot afford hospital treatment for COVID-19. There were reports of a severe shortage of oxygen cylinders and the need to pay 1,400 manats (at that time around 55 USD) a day just to breathe. Proper treatment and a stay in hospital cost people between 10,000 and 15,000 manats, when the average monthly salary is 1,500 manats.

THE STORY OF POLICE

MAJOR SAPA GURBANGULYEV

On July 3, [Sapa Gurbangulyev](#), 51, a police major in Vekilbazar district, Mary region, telephoned his wife from the infectious diseases hospital in the village of Yoloten, where he had been taken by medical orderlies in protective suits. Before this he had been treated in Mary regional hospital for fluid on the lungs. According to sources, the major had difficulty breathing, but the regional hospital did not have oxygen equipment. When he was already in Yoloten, the major told his wife by phone that he was still not being given oxygen. He said he was in danger and asked her to get him out of there as soon as possible. His wife tried to get into the hospital but was not allowed beyond the gate. When he heard, the major said agitatedly, "Then they'll give me an injection now and kill me!" Half an hour later hospital staff came out to tell her the major had died.

The body was given to relatives the next morning in a hermetically sealed wrapper. They were given strict instructions not to open the wrapper until the results of a COVID-19 test were obtained. The cause of death was documented as inflammation of the lungs. It's still not known what injections the major was given.

On July 8, the Turkmenistan state information agency reported that the president had permitted the Health Ministry “to conclude contracts following established procedure with pharmaceutical producers in the Russian Federation for the purchase of the required volume of anti-virus medications.” Turkmen.news learnt that 10 000 000 USD had been allocated for the purchases. However, coronavirus patients in hospital were offered favipiravir tablets produced in China.

There was a special procedure for the funerals of those who had died with coronavirus. Bodies were returned in plastic wrappers, which were not to be opened, and relatives were forbidden to hold a wake. After independent journalists detected from satellite photographs an increase in the number of graves at one cemetery, another requirement was introduced for funerals: graves now have to be level with the ground so they cannot be detected from above.

Turkmen.news has confirmed information that many people who could not afford hospital treatment looked for treatment plans on the Internet and followed them at home.

Some families used dubious remedies, for example, buying and drinking dog fat to tackle bronchitis and pneumonia.

HOW ARE THE OFFICIAL MEDIA REPORTING THE PANDEMIC?

At the start of the pandemic officials frequently said that Turkmenistan could prevent coronavirus entering the country. The state media did not publish details about the new infection, occasionally mentioning it as a purely foreign problem.

Moreover, active propaganda of “measures to prevent acute respiratory viral infections [ARVIs]” began as early as spring 2020. These measures included fumigating premises with harmala (Syrian rue), which according to the multi-volume herbal by President Berdimuhamedov, *The Medicinal Plants of Turkmenistan*, supposedly has an antiviral effect. All institutions were regularly fumigated and the country even had a shortage of harmala. Later, the media started to write about the antiviral effect of licorice root, which is also mentioned in the president’s work.

When mask wearing became compulsory in Turkmenistan in July, the authorities tried to justify the requirement by referring to the presence of harmful dust in the air, spread over the country from the dried up Aral Sea. This led to official discussion of the “Aral problem” and even to the creation of a Scientific Clinical Center for the Study of the Impact of the Aral Disaster on the Environment of the Neighboring Regions.

The official media gave brief explanations of other quarantine measures, such as closing road and rail transport links between regions, citing “the prevention of infectious diseases.” It was impossible to find out in the official media, for example, how to get from Ashgabat to the city of Dashoguz in the event of an emergency. Anyone who needed to make such a trip had to approach officials themselves to discover the existence of a special commission on allowing citizens onto internal flights.

From around the end of summer, reminders about “preventing ARVIs” were printed daily on the back pages of the government newspaper *Neytralnyy Turkmenistan* (Neutral Turkmenistan). Sometimes this took the form of comprehensive columns written by doctors, and sometimes a short infographic. Real measures to combat infection (masks, handwashing, social distancing) were described, and also the benefits of taking licorice, fumigation with harmala, and drinking herbal teas.

From fall 2020, officials stopped saying directly that there is no COVID-19 in Turkmenistan. As before, state media coverage still implies that the coronavirus pandemic is a purely foreign problem. But the absence of coronavirus is almost never mentioned outright when listing the achievements of the authorities.

ARE VACCINATIONS BEING GIVEN IN THE COUNTRY?

In January 2021 the Turkmen authorities announced the approval of two Russian vaccines: Sputnik V and EpiVacCorona. Then Chinese TV reported their vaccines had been sent to Turkmenistan (it emerged later that these were Vero Cell). Turkmenistan's state media did not report the approval of the Chinese Vero Cell vaccine, but reported in May that three Russian vaccines had already been supplied to the country (probably Sputnik V, EpiVacCorona and CoviVac) and two Chinese vaccines.

The state media do not report progress in vaccinations. Only unofficial sources say that doctors, teachers, and pensioners are being vaccinated. Vero Cell and most often Sputnik V are used for these jobs.

We did not manage to find out how widely EpiVacCorona is used. Turkmenistan is so far the only country other than Russia to approve the vaccine for use. As for CoviVac, in May 2021 the developers' website said only that the vaccine had been approved in Russia, and did not mention anywhere else.

In March–April 2021, soon after the start of vaccinations, quarantine restrictions began to be eased in Turkmenistan. Road and rail transport between the regions was partially restored and previously closed institutions were allowed to return to work.

It's not known whether the lifting of quarantine is justified, because statistics on the prevalence of the disease, the number of cases and vaccinations are not available. Judging from the reports of independent sources on deaths, the first wave of coronavirus hit Turkmenistan in July and the second at the end of 2020. There have been no recent reports of deaths. However, several sources are not convinced that there are zero fatalities. They think that doctors may have stopped returning bodies in plastic wrappers and requiring a special method of burial. As a result, fatalities are attracting less attention. Death certificates too show any diagnosis except one that could imply death from coronavirus.

HAS THE TURKMEN ECONOMY SUFFERED?

Before the start of the COVID pandemic the economy of Turkmenistan was in the grip of a deep crisis. This isn't the first year the country has experienced problems with food supplies. People cannot afford even the essentials and corruption is acute. Despite the authorities' reports of massive privatization and the development of private business, the level of state regulation of the economy is extremely high. Only people close to the head of state's family can engage successfully [in major business](#).

The pandemic sharply exacerbated the existing problems. The ban on travel between regions deprived people in the outskirts of the opportunity to go to work in the capital. The opportunity was also lost to travel abroad to work. Those migrants who were already abroad at the start of the pandemic began to lose their jobs because of the deteriorating economic situation in the host countries. Those who kept their jobs began to face problems sending money back home to Turkmenistan.

Withdrawing cash remains a problem. Cashless transactions are not widespread in Turkmenistan, so all working people, students, pensioners, and recipients of child and disability benefits try to withdraw their money in cash.

The authorities provided no help to the owners of cafes, hairdressing salons, gyms, or other establishments that had to stop work for several months. The reverse, those business owners who continued to work illegally had to pay bribes to officers from the law-enforcement agencies.

Officially, this is the Epoch of Might and Happiness in Turkmenistan. Before the pandemic the authorities reported only on success in all sectors. But in 2020 Berdimuhamedov himself began to let slip comments on economic difficulties. True, he puts them all down to the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy.

It's nothing new to see dozens of people standing in line at ATMs. There is no question of any social distancing in these situations. Lines for food and cash have worsened the epidemiological situation with coronavirus.

In March 2021, Turkmenistan's Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, which every entrepreneur in the country has to join, hiked its membership fees. After quarantine many businessmen could not pay even at the old rate.

The increase in fees means bankruptcy for them.



Bread queue in Ashgabat

ARE THE AUTHORITIES HELPING CITIZENS STRANDED ABROAD?

The Turkmen authorities tacitly disapprove of migration. Before the pandemic citizens who had already bought tickets for flights abroad could be prevented from boarding without any reason being given. Turkmenistan's consulates abroad would not extend citizens' international passports, and if a citizen returned home to renew their passport, they would be put on the list of those banned from travelling and would not be able to fly back to their work. The special services followed migrants who showed signs of opposition activity and put pressure on their relatives back home.

It wasn't only labor migrants but also people on short trips who were caught out when the borders were closed and regular flights stopped. Relatives could not send them money, because the only category of Turkmen citizens permitted to convert manats to hard currency are the parents of students at foreign universities (and they are also subject to strict limits). The authorities promised to allow relatives of people stranded abroad to convert 500 USD, but very few people were able to do this in practice.

Only in August 2020 did Turkmenistan Airlines start repatriation flights. There were not enough of them and only a few people managed to get places. The way the consulates draw up lists of citizens returning home is opaque and there are reports of corruption in the system.

In early 2021 the Turkmen authorities sharply reduced the limits on the sums of money relatives could send to students abroad. Students started to receive 50 USD a month from their families. This is not enough to live

on and the students have to work. This is often unofficial nighttime work which can be dangerous. There have been several reports of the deaths of students. Turkmen diplomats do not help to send the bodies home. They are buried by their compatriots in the host country.

The problem extending passports has also not been resolved and now citizens abroad cannot physically return to Turkmenistan. In the fall the consulates started to give migrants temporary certificates valid for six months to replace passports. This did not fully resolve the problem of the illegal status of migrants whose passports have expired.

CORONAVIRUS IN TURKMENISTAN: A CHRONOLOGY

2020

JANUARY 30	A plane landed ¹ in Turkmenabat (the administrative center of Lebap region) carrying Turkmen students from China. The passengers were asked about their health and had their temperatures taken. The same day it was announced that the last flight from Beijing would take place on February 1 after which flights to China would be cancelled until the end of the month at least ² .
JANUARY 31	Turkmenistan closed the border with Uzbekistan. The Uzbek State Customs Committee told turkmen.news by phone that the crossing points were working as normal on their side ³ .
FEBRUARY 1	Lebap region was quietly declared a quarantine zone ⁴ . State institutions held meetings at which employees were advised to wear medical masks and put oxolinic ointment on their noses.
EARLY FEBRUARY	A quarantine camp was set up in Lebap region. At this time only arrivals from China were placed in the camp, and it was possible to avoid quarantine for a bribe ⁵ . At around this time Ashgabat residents began to receive booklets on preventing coronavirus.
FEBRUARY 24	An Ashgabat resident was fined ⁶ for wearing a medical mask on the street. The police accused her of creating panic and lack of trust in the government's measures to combat the virus.
FEBRUARY 25	Berdimuhamedov held a meeting ⁷ with Deputy Prime Minister Purli Agamuradov and Health and Medical Industry Minister Nurmuhammed Amannepesov. The head of state heard reports on restrictions on travel to countries with registered cases of coronavirus (with the exception of essential business trips). Stricter controls on entry to Turkmenistan for citizens of these countries were also announced ⁹ . The same day the border was closed with Iran ⁸ . The creation of an emergency commission to combat the spread of diseases, headed by Amannepesov, was announced. In addition, swimming pools and saunas at the Avaza resort were closed and the provision of a range of services was stopped ¹⁰ . As a result, customers began to cancel their bookings and the hotels lost revenue.
FEBRUARY 26	Reports began to appear about the cancellation of flights to Istanbul ¹¹ ¹² . The border with Afghanistan was closed.

MARCH 3	Staff at the infectious diseases hospital in Choganly, near Ashgabat, told Radio Azatlyk that at least two patients had been found to have COVID-19 ¹³ . The Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases denied the report.
MARCH 5	Redirection of all international flights from Ashgabat to Turkmenabat began ¹⁴ . A short while later international flights were stopped altogether.
MARCH 13	Berdimuhamedov instructed that all premises be fumigated with harmala (Syrian rue) ¹⁵ . “This is how our ancestors prevented the spread of infectious diseases”, he said.
MARCH 17	A new version of booklets was released similar to those distributed at the start of February ¹⁶ . Now they did not talk about “preventing COVID-19,” but about “preventing acute respiratory viral infections.” At the same time preparations were under way nationwide for the spring clean-up and Novruz celebrations in a failure to observe WHO recommendations on cancelling mass events ¹⁷ .
MARCH 19	Highways within the country were closed ¹⁸ and restrictions were imposed on travel between regions.
MARCH 24	Playing sport was cancelled nationwide ¹⁹ and gyms and sports halls were closed. Ashgabat cafes and restaurants were also shut down ²⁰ .
MARCH 25	The movement of export, import, and transit cargo within the country was restricted ²¹ . Cargo reaching the Garabogaz and Farap checkpoints had to be transported onwards by Turkmen hauliers.
MARCH 30	School holidays were extended by one week in order to prevent coronavirus ²² .



Check point at entry to Ashgabat

MARCH 31	In the southeastern Mary region officials began to make health checks on residents who had returned home from abroad between the start of November 2019 and the end of January 2020 ²³ . They visited them at home to ask about their health and take their temperatures. The same day a draft plan to ensure preparedness for and response to coronavirus in Turkmenistan was studied at the UN representative office in Ashgabat ²⁴ . It emerged at the same time that the country's authorities had confirmed a Comprehensive Plan of Measures to Prevent the Introduction of COVID-19.
APRIL 3	Citizens of Turkmenistan who had completed quarantine told turkmen.news about the tough conditions in the quarantine camp ²⁵ . These citizens thought there was a very high chance of catching the virus inside the camp. New arrivals who could in theory be infected were placed together with those who were about to be discharged in two or three days and travel to the city.
APRIL 6	The USA allocated 920,000 USD to Turkmenistan for protection against coronavirus ²⁶ . This was reported on official website Turkmenportal, but the article was later removed.
APRIL 8	It emerged that weeks earlier numbers of guests at weddings and other family celebrations had been restricted to 200 people ²⁷ . In cafes and restaurants no more than six people were allowed to sit at one table.
APRIL 9	Information appeared about illegal taxis, which could help people circumvent the ban on travel between regions ²⁸ .
APRIL 16	On its official site the U.S. Embassy noted that, "Turkmenistan has not officially acknowledged any cases of COVID-19 within its borders and may be disinclined to do so if cases were confirmed." ²⁹
APRIL 22	Talking about COVID-19, Turkmen Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov said, "Had there been just one case registered in Turkmenistan, we would first of all have informed our international partners and the World Health Organization." ³⁰ He added that foreign diplomats could visit the quarantine center.
APRIL 23	The WHO regional director for Europe, Hans Kluge, announced that the organization's experts would visit Turkmenistan and Tajikistan (whose authorities at that time also denied the presence of coronavirus) ³¹ . Kluge said that the visit would take place in a week's time.
APRIL 27–29	Reports appeared in independent media about the Turkmen authorities' plans to hide cases of coronavirus from the WHO experts. ^{32 33}

MAY	All hotels at the Avaza resort were closed ³⁴ . There was no holiday season, which led to the dismissal of some of the hotel staff. Whoever was not sacked was put on unpaid leave.
MAY 1	A WHO mission left for Tajikistan (by that time the country had stopped hiding the presence of COVID-19). At the same time, an anonymous employee of a UN agency reported there were difficulties obtaining an invitation from Turkmenistan ³⁵ .
MAY 5	It emerged that the WHO experts who were planning to travel to Turkmenistan from Tajikistan were “stuck” in Dushanbe as they had no invitation from the Turkmen side ³⁶ .
MAY 9	A Victory Day parade was held in Ashgabat. Guests came from Russia to attend the event.
MAY 12	Cemetery workers in the Ashgabat suburb of Choganly reported a sharp increase in the number of burials over the past five weeks ³⁷ . Sources also reported that COVID-19 patients from the country’s regions were coming to the infectious diseases hospital in Choganly.
MAY 21	Tents began to appear on roadsides at the entry points to towns and villages where drivers and passengers had their temperatures checked ³⁸ .
MAY 25	It emerged that fishing had been banned in Dashoguz region because of the danger of touching infected medical masks and other garbage which entered watercourses upstream in Uzbekistan ³⁹ . A ban was soon introduced on the Caspian coast too ⁴⁰ , and was still in place in spring 2021 when it was already known that this is not how coronavirus spreads. This dealt a severe economic blow to residents of coastal areas. ⁴¹
JUNE 1	The U.S. government allocated 500,000 USD to Turkmenistan via USAID for preventive measures against COVID-19 amongst children and health workers. ⁴²
JUNE 11	Russia’s ambassador to Turkmenistan, Aleksandr Blokhin, said he believed the official version that there was no coronavirus in the country. ⁴³ “If there were something, it would be impossible to suppress that kind of information. It would have been all round Teke or the Russian Bazaar more quickly than in the media”, the ambassador said.

JUNE 15	Russia's Nezavisimaya gazeta accused Blokhin of "buying the loyalty" of the Turkmen authorities. The next day the diplomat wrote a letter to the newspaper which said: "Our relations with Turkmenistan are mutually beneficial and based on healthy pragmatism, not 'buying loyalty', which can be seen in the unprecedented level of cooperation in politics and business." ⁴⁴
JUNE 19	Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov promised to receive a WHO delegation in early July ⁴⁵ . The minister stressed that there was no coronavirus in Turkmenistan thanks to the developed health care system.
JUNE 23	The U.S. Embassy said on its website ⁴⁶ : "The U.S. Embassy has received reports of local citizens with symptoms consistent with COVID-19 undergoing COVID-19 testing and being placed in quarantine in infectious diseases hospitals for up to 14 days."
JUNE 24	Turkmenistan's Foreign Ministry responded ⁴⁷ : "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan notes that this kind of 'fake' information is groundless and lacks objectivity. Ministry representatives have frequently notified the U.S. Ambassador to Turkmenistan of the inadmissibility of spreading tendentious and unconfirmed information."
EARLY JULY	Independent media started receiving dozens of reports of the deaths of Turkmen citizens from pneumonia ⁴⁸ . Sources in the health sector said there were positive tests for COVID-19 but they were not being registered.
JULY 2	An infectious diseases hospital was set up and equipped at Turkish company Polimeks' former camp near Ashgabat ⁴⁹ . Visiting was not allowed. A similar hospital was set up at Turkish construction firm Gap İnşaat's base near the village of Dzhanga in Balkan region. Asked by turkmen.news whether many patients recovered at the hospital, one medical worker replied, "Most are carried out."
JULY 3	Police Major Sapa Gurbangulyev died in Yoloten. He had been in hospital with COVID-19 symptoms. Before his death the major telephoned his wife and asked her to get him out of hospital as soon as possible as he was afraid of dying as a result of an injection. His wife could not get him out and half an hour later she was told her husband had died. Turkmen.news found out about this much later, on September 1 ⁵⁰ .
JULY 5	WHO experts arrived in Turkmenistan. ⁵¹



WHO delegation on their way to Turkmenistan

JULY 6

Public transport drivers and sales staff in Ashgabat were obliged to wear medical masks. Two days later police were required to wear them too. Many people in the capital and other cities started wearing masks voluntarily, as they feared for their lives. A few days later the price of masks soared.⁵²

JULY 7

The government and President Berdimuhamedov himself went on holiday until August 6⁵³. Before his vacation the president signed a resolution permitting the Health Ministry's main pharmaceutical association to sign contracts with producers in Russia for the purchase of the "necessary quantities" of antiviral medications.⁵⁴

JULY 8

The Turkmen president's oil and gas adviser Yagshigeldi Kakaev died of pneumonia in Ashgabat⁵⁵. The Oil and Gas University was later named after him. At almost the same time, during the night of July 7-8, Kemal Uckun, an adviser at the Turkish Embassy, died⁵⁶. His widow later made a complaint against Turkish officials for failing to evacuate her husband to Turkey. She had sent X-rays of her husband's lungs to three Turkish clinics and all the doctors had confirmed a diagnosis of COVID-19⁵⁷.

Turkmenistan's Foreign Ministry circulated a statement that "substances hazardous to human health, including viruses, could be carried by air currents in the sensitive ecological environment of Central Asia."⁵⁸ It said that "air masses forming in the ecological disaster zone caused by the drying up of the Aral Sea pose a special danger." Coronavirus became known informally in Turkmenistan as "Aral dust."

JULY 12

An Ashgabat resident saw the members of the WHO mission sitting poolside in the capital's Yldyz Hotel. She took a photograph of the visitors and put it on Instagram, where Nurgeldi Halykov, who had gone to the same school as the woman, saw it. He sent the photo to turkmen.news who published it.⁵⁹ On July 13 Halykov's acquaintance removed him from her Instagram friends list, and a few hours later he was summoned to the police station, after which contact with him was lost. It emerged later that a criminal case had been brought against Halykov for fraud over a supposedly unpaid debt. In September he was sentenced to four years in a prison colony⁶⁰.

Turkmenistan's Health Ministry released a report which "recommended in the strongest possible terms" the use of medical masks because of the increased level of dust in the air blown in from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan.

JULY 13

Mask wearing was made obligatory.⁶¹ The same day Ashgabat's largest mall, Berkarar, and the Tolkuchka market closed for quarantine.

JULY 15

A briefing was held following the WHO mission.⁶² The experts did not insist that the infection was circulating in Turkmenistan, but recommended that the authorities behave as though it were. The head of the mission, Catherine Smallwood, said that it was time "to shift the focus from efforts to prevent the infection entering the country to efforts to prevent it spreading amongst the population. "The same day An-2 airplanes started spraying disinfectant in several districts⁶³.

JULY 16

The operation of trains and buses between the regions of the country was cancelled without explanation⁶⁴ ⁶⁵ and all mosques and churches were closed⁶⁶. Turkmen.news sources reported that the movement of trains had actually stopped earlier on July 14⁶⁷.

An-2 airplane sprayed chlorine onto the land along the border close to Uzbekistan



JULY 18	Hasan Metkuliev, 54, head of Farap district in Lebap region, died of pneumonia ⁶⁸ . Turkmen.news managed to speak to him by phone shortly before his death. The official said he felt well and denied reports that he had coronavirus.
JULY 21	All non-food shops, cinemas, theaters, parks, attractions, museums, beauty salons, hairdressers, saunas, dry cleaners, tailors' workshops, sports facilities, cafes and restaurants were closed "in order to prevent diseases." ⁶⁹
JULY 22	Quoting two health care workers in Balkanabat, a turkmen.news source reported that 83 people with symptoms of COVID-19 had died in the city over the past week. ⁷⁰
JULY 23	The Turkmen branches of Malaysia's Petronas oil and gas company and China's CNPC energy company shut down for quarantine ⁷¹ . According to turkmen.news sources, 16 Petronas employees had been found to have coronavirus. The same day government newspaper Neytralnyy Turkmenistan for the first time published a checklist of precautionary measures against infectious diseases ⁷² . After this, the newspaper published similar material on its back pages every day.
JULY 24	The Analytical Center for Central Asia published an investigation into the death rate in Turkmenistan, based on satellite photographs ⁷³ . Between March 25 and April 16, 2020, 317 new graves appeared in the Balkanabat city cemetery. For comparison, between May 31, 2018 and March 25, 2020 524 new graves appeared there. A few days later independent media reported that the authorities had ordered that all new graves be disguised so they could not be seen from satellites ⁷⁴ . This requirement was repeated many times.
JULY 27	It emerged that the Niyazov Hospital and the research and clinical cardiology center (popularly known as the Red Cross hospital) in Ashgabat had been repurposed to treat pneumonia patients ⁷⁵ .



Fresh graves in the cemetery in Mary



Infectious diseases hospital in Choganly

JULY 28

Relatives of patients at Choganly infectious diseases hospital had to pay bribes for their loved ones to be connected to a ventilator, turkmen.news sources reported. There was not enough oxygen for all seriously ill patients⁷⁶.

JULY 29

It emerged that the Kopetdag stadium in Ashgabat had closed for quarantine after the death of Muhammet Keshikov, who held the title Honoured Trainer of Turkmenistan⁷⁷.

JULY 31

The Turkmen Ministry of Health compelled family doctors to go out door to door and fill in questionnaires about citizens' state of health and any signs of coronavirus.

EARLY AUGUST

The Melhem sanatorium in Mary region was turned into a hospital for pneumonia patients⁷⁸. According to turkmen.news' sources, many major companies were told to bear the costs of funding COVID hospitals. The COVID center at the Melhem sanatorium is under the patronage of Taze-Ay, a producer of salami and other processed meats.

AUGUST 2

Kurbanmuhammet Muhammedov, a driver for the OSCE Center in Ashgabat, died of complications caused by coronavirus. His death was confirmed to turkmen.news by two independent sources. The OSCE declined to comment⁷⁹.

It emerged that the bodies of those who had supposedly died of pneumonia were given to their families in black plastic sacks. Relatives were told to bury the bodies without opening the sacks⁸⁰.

AUGUST 4

Doctors of retirement age in Mary region were sent on holiday, sources told turkmen.news the same day⁸¹. The remaining medical workers were told their diplomas would be annulled if they refused to treat coronavirus patients.

AUGUST 7	In an online meeting with WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and the WHO regional director for Europe, Hans Kluge, Turkmen President Berdimuhamedov agreed to independent testing for the presence of COVID-19 in the country ⁸² . This promise was not kept.
AUGUST 14	According to turkmen.news sources, prisoner Bayramdurdy Saparov died in strict regime colony LB-K/11 in Lebap region ⁸³ . He suffered pain in his chest and a lack of oxygen for two weeks, but the colony's infirmary was unable to give him the help he needed.
AUGUST 17	Parents were warned that their children would have to carry individual hygiene kits from the start of the school year on September 1 ⁸⁴ . The same day it emerged that housing administration staff in many regions were going door to door and demanding that citizens sign a commitment to wear a mask, observe social distancing, and leave the house only when necessary ⁸⁵ .
AUGUST 18	Sona Cherkezova, 64, an infectious diseases doctor at the infectious diseases hospital in Choganly, died of coronavirus. She had worked to the end to save patients' lives.
AUGUST 22	Berdimuhamedov signed a law introducing additions to the Criminal Code of Turkmenistan ⁸⁶ . Article 119 (1) was added covering "persistent refusal to be treated for an infectious disease of an epidemic or pandemic nature, and conscious infection [of others] with it."
AUGUST 22–23	Turkmenistan Airlines organized the first repatriation flights for citizens stranded abroad ⁸⁷ . Planes left for Delhi and Minsk. Since then, flights have been organized regularly from various parts of the world, but there have not been enough of them. Many people who wanted to return to Turkmenistan were unable to get seats.
AUGUST 27	A Turkmen government plane made its first flight to Germany ⁸⁸ . It brought to Turkmenistan medical dressings and boxes bearing the logo of U.S. firm Promega, a manufacturer of technology for the study of viruses. Over the next six months several more flights were made. The official media only reported one of the flights, which took place in November and brought to Turkmenistan a group of German doctors who took part in a range of official events.
AUGUST 31	A former patient in the COVID center at Melhem sanatorium in Mary region told turkmen.news about his treatment there ⁸⁹ . He said he had been in a bad way at home for three days, then decided to seek medical help after all. He spoke favourably about conditions in the sanatorium and the treatment there. He acknowledged, though, that while he had been there, he had seen two or three people die.

LATE AUGUST	The cotton harvest began in Turkmenistan. As in previous years, public sector workers were sent in large numbers to the harvest. People were taken to the fields in overcrowded buses.
EARLY SEPTEMBER	The coronavirus hospital at the Polimeks base near Ashgabat was closed because of a reduction in the number of patients.
SEPTEMBER 1	The school year began in Turkmenistan ⁹⁰ . Classes were divided into groups in order to reduce the number of pupils, children had to carry hygiene kits with them, and lessons were organized in several shifts. This regime remained in place until the end of the year. In many schools parents had to sign pledges to follow hygiene measures. ⁹¹
SEPTEMBER 10	It emerged that people in Mary region caught without masks in public places were threatened with 15 days detention and being sent to the cotton fields. ⁹²
SEPTEMBER 14	A scientific center was opened in Turkmenistan to study the negative impact of the Aral Sea on people's health. ⁹³
SEPTEMBER 16	It emerged that closed cafes, hairdressing salons, and other establishments were operating in secret ⁹⁴ . Vendors from closed markets sold their goods on the streets nearby. It emerged later that vendors also sold their wares in homes and organizations, including hospitals ⁹⁵ .
SEPTEMBER 22, 25	Berdimuhamedov made speeches at the opening of the UN General Assembly and a sitting of the Halk Maslahaty (National Council) ⁹⁶ . In both speeches he referred to coronavirus as a serious global problem, but for the first time did not stress that there were supposedly no infections in Turkmenistan. After these speeches the official media stopped listing the absence of COVID-19 as one of the achievements of the Turkmen regime.
OCTOBER 12	It emerged that people require police and health certificates in order to book internal flights, the only legal way to travel between the regions ⁹⁷ . Certificates can be obtained with bribes.
OCTOBER 16	Radio Azatlyk reported an outbreak of coronavirus in women's prison colony DZ-K/8 in Dashoguz region ⁹⁸ .

OCTOBER 20	Berdimuhamedov held a meeting with Nurmuhamet Amannepesov, who is head of the emergency commission to combat the spread of disease and minister of health and the medical industry ⁹⁹ . The president said, "Since the start of the pandemic, we have put forward the theory, which has already been confirmed in international scientific circles, that viruses are spread not only via airborne droplets but also via airborne dust particles, which significantly increases the distance of infection." This phrase supposedly justified the summer declarations about "harmful dust."
OCTOBER 26	Turkmen.news sources talked about corruption and quarantine. In particular, they said the police were "selling" en masse the certificates required for travel to other regions. ¹⁰⁰
LATE OCTOBER	The number of marquees in the yards of Ashgabat, used to host weddings and memorials, increased again ¹⁰¹ . Such events have been formally banned, but for a bribe the police will turn a blind eye. Rumors started circulating in October that enforcement would soon be tightened so the city's residents hurried to hold all their family celebrations.
NOVEMBER 2	The Chronicles of Turkmenistan found out that wealthy residents of Ashgabat pay 200-300 USD to receive COVID treatment at home ¹⁰² . People are afraid to stay in hospital. Those who cannot afford it prefer self-treatment.
NOVEMBER 3	The length of stay in the quarantine camp for arrivals from abroad was increased from 14 to 21 days. ¹⁰³
NOVEMBER 6	It emerged that special commissions are now issuing certificates confirming the need for travel ¹⁰⁴ . It became much harder to pay a bribe for a certificate than it had been when the police were responsible.
NOVEMBER 15	Berdimuhamedov again declared there was no coronavirus in the country. ¹⁰⁵
NOVEMBER 23	<p>Turkmen residents over 50 years of age were banned from all travel between regions¹⁰⁶. They could no longer travel to another region even with good reason. This did not apply to the 63-year-old president, though, who continued to make working visits¹⁰⁷.</p> <p>Turkmenistan joined the international COVAX program to distribute vaccines against COVID-19.¹⁰⁸</p>



German doctors en route to Turkmenistan

NOVEMBER 25

It was announced that the celebrations of the 25th anniversary of Turkmenistan's neutrality would be held without spectators¹⁰⁹. Nevertheless, the celebrations included a large number of mass events, which were shown on TV¹¹⁰. Participants did not wear masks, in contrast to the main subjects of reports on the lives of "ordinary people." Reports soon started to come in of deaths from COVID-19 in the arts community.

NOVEMBER 26

A Turkmen government Bombardier Challenger 870 (tail number EZ-B024), operated by Turkmenistan Airlines, made a secret flight to Munich. It flew to Germany empty, but was loaded for the return flight with boxes of sterile materials (as on the previous occasion on August 27), diplomatic mail, and plastic bags marked VIP. In addition, two minibuses carrying doctors drove up to the plane steps, they all boarded, and the flight took off to Turkmenistan.

NOVEMBER 27

Residents of Mary over the age of 50 were asked not to leave home unless strictly necessary¹¹¹. At the same time, students from other towns studying at the state energy institute in Mary were sent to the quarantine camp.

EARLY DECEMBER

The coronavirus hospital at the Polimeks base was reopened¹¹². A second wave of the virus began in the country and hospitals again could not cope with the influx of patients.

DECEMBER 3

The cancellation of the children's parties around the country's main New Year tree was announced¹¹³.

DECEMBER 15

It was announced that students living in student dorms and pupils at boarding schools would not be allowed home for the holidays¹¹⁴.

DECEMBER 16

The British ambassador to Turkmenistan, Hugh Philpott, tweeted that he had been sick with COVID-19¹¹⁵. The Turkmen authorities did not comment, though in July they had harshly responded even to the weather forecast on the CIS TV channel Mir-24.

DECEMBER 20

The widow of Turkish diplomat Kemal Uckun, who died in July, made a complaint against Turkish officials for failing to arrange his evacuation from Turkmenistan¹¹⁶. Later, in an interview with turkmen.news the widow talked in detail about her husband's coronavirus illness¹¹⁷. Turkmenistan's Foreign Ministry did not respond to the widow's interview, just as they did not respond to the British ambassador's tweet.

2021**JANUARY 18**

Turkmenistan approved the Russian COVID-19 vaccine Sputnik V¹¹⁸. There was no doubt about its effectiveness. The following day it was announced that Turkmenistan's Ministry of Health was prepared to transport and store the vaccine, which requires strict temperature controls¹¹⁹.

JANUARY 21

Berdimuhamedov promised to vaccinate free of charge foreign tennis players who came to Turkmenistan to compete in the qualifying round for the Davis Cup 2021¹²⁰. "Although we have an approved vaccine, foreign sportsmen may wish to receive another vaccine or special medication, so they must have a choice," the head of state said.

JANUARY 28

Malikniyaz Hojaniyazov and his wife Hesel Amanova [died of COVID-19](#) within hours of each other, after 48 years together. Hojaniyazov had been director of the Salgym mountaineering club and a well-known explorer, while Amanova had worked at different times for the state statistics bodies and the Union of Women of Turkmenistan. Hojaniyazov was 64 and Amanova 65. They were buried on January 29.

JANUARY 29

The Russian vaccine EpiVacCorona was registered¹²¹. Turkmenistan remains the only country, other than Russia, to have approved the use of the vaccine. Those who have received the EpiVacCorona jab doubt its effectiveness, as independent tests do not show an increase in the number of antibodies. It was announced the same day that foreigners entering the country would have to provide a vaccination certificate¹²². So potential competitors in the Davis Cup lost the chance to get a free vaccine from Turkmenistan.

EARLY FEBRUARY

The first reports¹²³ about vaccination of different categories of the population appeared in the independent media¹²⁴. The official media did not report on the process, mentioning only the approval of the vaccines.



Malikniyaz Hojaniyazov and his wife Hesel Amanova

MARCH 1	A partial resumption began of road and rail links between the regions ^{125 126} . Cafes, restaurants and other establishments previously under lockdown gradually reopened ¹²⁷ .
MARCH 7	Chinese TV reported the delivery of a Chinese vaccine to Turkmenistan (it emerged later that this was Vero Cell) ¹²⁸ . Turkmen state media did not report the approval of this vaccine, but according to independent sources the vaccine is being used in the country ¹²⁹ .
EARLY APRIL	Amnesty International published a report on attempts to hush up COVID-19 and other problems in Turkmenistan ¹³⁰ .
MAY 3	It was announced that the Avaza resort would be open for holidays from June 1 to September 15 under a special regime ¹³¹ . Permission to make the trip must be obtained from the migration service. Hotels will accept only guests vaccinated against COVID-19.
MAY 14	Three Russian and two Chinese vaccines have been supplied to Turkmenistan, it was announced at a meeting of the emergency commission to tackle the spread of diseases ¹³² .
MAY 18	Turkmen.news sources reported two cases of vaccinated citizens suffering cardiac side effects, and the death shortly after vaccination of an elderly lady who had a weak heart ¹³³ .

COMMENTARY

BY CHAIRMAN OF THE ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT LAWYERS OF TURKMENISTAN TIMUR MISRIKHANOV



Covering up the truth about coronavirus when it poses a threat to public health and denying the presence of the virus in the country are a crime according to the laws of Turkmenistan.

Citizens of Turkmenistan have the right to obtain information about events, facts or phenomena that pose a risk to their lives or health. It is, therefore, the citizens of Turkmenistan who are the victims of this crime.

The subject matter of the crime is information about topics, facts, events, phenomena and processes, the acts of physical and juridical persons, and the bodies of the state authorities and administration, that pose a threat to the life and health of people or the environment, irrespective of the form in which the threat or threats are posed.

The object of the crime includes action or inaction consisting of the concealment or distortion of information ... about events, facts or phenomena posing a threat to life or public health.

Concealing information is the failure to bring it to the attention of people who have the right to receive it or need to receive it, when conveying the information was obligatory in the legal sense or was essential in order to influence events, facts or phenomena posing a threat to life, public health or the environment.

Distorting information is the reporting of incomplete or inaccurate data, official forecasts and assessments of facts, events or phenomena posing a threat to what should be protected.

Article 309 of the Criminal Code of Turkmenistan says: "Concealing or distorting information ... about events, facts, or phenomena that pose a risk to the life or health of people by an individual who is obliged to provide such information to the public is punishable by loss of the right to hold specific posts or to undertake specific activity for a period up to five years or a fine between ten to twenty average monthly salaries or by correctional labor for up to two years.

"The same conduct which causes harm to the health of people or entails other consequences is punishable by a fine between fifty and a hundred average monthly salaries or loss of freedom for up to three years with loss of the right to hold specific posts or to engage in specific activity for up to three years, or without such loss."

Moreover, according to Article 15 of the Public Health Code of Turkmenistan, every citizen has the right to receive directly or through their representative, public associations or the mass media free, objective information about:

- the incidence of disease, epidemiological situation, and radiation situation, the condition of the environment and its influence on public health;
- the results of public hygiene procedures or other special actions, health norms, regulations and public hygiene legal norms. The exception is information that under the laws of Turkmenistan concerns state, official or commercial secrets.

Events, facts, or phenomena posing a threat include natural, manmade or other processes that really could entail consequences for people and the environment if they develop unfavourably or without appropriate measures of control and regulation. In this instance, the circulation of COVID-19 in Turkmenistan is one such fact.

Under the law the subject of the crime is the person obliged to provide the information to the public. In Turkmenistan the president not only ordered the relevant officials to conceal information about coronavirus, he himself denied its presence in the country.

This behavior by the head of state led to serious consequences, such as causing grave harm to the health of citizens (including their death), lengthy transport delays, interruptions in the work of institutions and enterprises. All this caused major material damage both to citizens and the state as a whole.

The laws of Turkmenistan enshrine the right of citizens to compensation for material and moral damages to health, including from the state. State servants perform their functions on behalf of the state, therefore, responsibility for their actions (or inaction) must rest with the state.

Bereaved relatives of those who died from coronavirus have the right to go to court to sue the authorities for compensation for their misfortune resulting from the inaction and even, I would say, deliberate criminal actions of the authorities.

In this case the respondent is the body obliged to perform the function of protecting the health of the public. First of all, this is the Ministry of Health. If the patient died in hospital, then the suit can be brought against the hospital leadership.

The procedure, quantity, roles, and responsibilities concerning the provision of information about processes and phenomena that might pose a danger to human health and the environment are regulated by other normative acts too:

- Article 42 of the Constitution of Turkmenistan
- The law of Turkmenistan of December 22, 2012 "On the mass media"
- The law of Turkmenistan of March 2, 2019, №126-VI "On chemical safety"
- The law of Turkmenistan of August 29, 2013 №56-IV "On radiation safety"
- The law of Turkmenistan of March 13, 2021 №334-VI "On advance warning and liquidation of emergencies" and other legal acts.

In accordance with Article 61 of the Constitution of Turkmenistan, "Every person has the right to demand through legal process restitution of material or moral damage, caused to them by the illegal actions of state bodies, other organizations, their workers, and also individuals."

Article 60 of the Constitution says: "Every person has the right to challenge in court the decisions and actions of state bodies, public associations, bodies of local administration, and officials." This provision is enshrined in criminal and civil law (Art. 46 of the Criminal Code, Art. 14 of the Civil Code).

Under Article 38 of the Civil Procedural Code, citizens bring a court action in accordance with the location of the respondent, i.e. the juridical person who violated their rights. If, for example, the state body is located in Kopetdag district of the city of Ashgabat, the suit must be brought in this district's court.

Citizens of Turkmenistan may also make a complaint to the UN Human Rights Committee that the country's authorities violated their rights and freedoms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF TURKMENISTAN

Officially recognize that COVID-19 is circulating in the country; make public the scale of the pandemic from the start of 2020 to the present time; disclose data on coronavirus infections and deaths; give the number of medical workers who caught COVID-19 at work and died as a result.

Establish the amount of material compensation for bereaved families and pay it within a short time.

Establish the amount of material support and/or tax breaks for the owners of small and medium-sized businesses that have suffered as a result of the restrictions during the pandemic.

Release Nurgeldi Halykov from detention right away, rehabilitate him, and pay compensation for practically a year of imprisonment on a fabricated charge.

Stop the persecution of civil activists and journalists for their desire to tell the truth about the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkmenistan.

TO THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO)

Stop pandering to the Turkmen government and playing along with them as they deny the presence of COVID-19, since Turkmenistan's cover-up of the real virus situation in the country poses a threat to the whole world.

Demand that the government officially recognize that the pandemic has been circulating in the country since the start of 2020 up to the present time; demand data on infections and deaths in Turkmenistan for the global statistical records.

Demand that the president of Turkmenistan immediately and unconditionally release from prison Nurgeldi Halykov, who received a four-year sentence for sending a photograph of the WHO experts during their visit to Ashgabat.

TO FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Demand that the government of Turkmenistan recognize that the COVID-19 virus is circulating in the country and not refer to other, fabricated causes of the illness and deaths of citizens.

Demand that Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov hold to account individuals who denied coronavirus and confused the international community about the circulation of an illness caused by contagious dust particles from the dried up bed of the Aral Sea.

Demand that the president and government of Turkmenistan stop the practice of concealing accurate information about any events that pose a threat to peoples' health and lives, including about pandemics such as the current one; demand that real data about COVID-19 in Turkmenistan be provided to the WHO and mass media.

Achieve the release from prison and full rehabilitation of Nurgeldi Halykov, sentenced on a criminal charge for sending a photograph of WHO experts to independent media.

Demand that the leadership of Turkmenistan stop persecuting people for their civil position of reporting to foreign media the truth about the COVID-19 situation in the country.

TO INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Give due consideration to applications from the Turkmen government for credits for any purposes, including preventing COVID-19.

Involve independent Turkmen civil society organizations in assessing such applications and in preparing objective explanatory notes/reports on the sector for which Turkmenistan has made a credit application.

Consider applications for COVID-19 related assistance only if the following conditions are met:

- the provision of a true picture of COVID-19 in the country;
- the release and rehabilitation of Nurgeldi Halykov and payment of compensation to him.

A LIST OF DEATHS FROM COVID-19 CONFIRMED BY TURKMEN.NEWS

2020 (47 PEOPLE)



MAKSAT AGAEV

an employee
at a private firm in Ashgabat,
he died

IN EARLY JUNE



RANO HASANOVA

the head of the obstetrics and gynecology
department at the Turkmen
State Medical University, she died

IN EARLY JULY



MERET GYLYJOV

a former employee
of the land management department
in the Abadan local administration, he died

IN EARLY JULY



BABAMURAT MUHYEV

a mathematics teacher
at the Pedagogical Institute in Turkmenabat,
he died

IN EARLY JULY



ANATOLIY RIZAYEV

a teacher
at the Ashgabat medical institute,
he died

IN EARLY JULY



BAHAR KOPEKOVA

a teacher
at the Republican Music School,
she died

IN EARLY JULY



SAPA GURBANGULYEV

a police major
in Vekilbazar district, Mary region,
he died
ON JULY 3



JUMAGUL BIBITOVA

a family doctor at polyclinic No. 6
in Turkmenabat,
she died
ON JULY 3



BATYR BAYRAMMURADOV

head of the Garry Lukman pharmacy
in Ashgabat,
he died
ON JULY 5



KEMAL UCKUN

the religious affairs adviser
at the Turkish Embassy,
he died
ON JULY 7



YAGSHIGELDI KAKAEV

the Turkmen president's
oil and gas adviser,
he died
ON JULY 8



GENNADIY ABAKUMOV

owner of the Dostluk cafe in Abadan,
he died
ON JULY 9



GULYA BABAeva

a family doctor
at the power station polyclinic in Abadan,
she died
ON JULY 12



CHARYGULY AVLIKULIEV

an employee at Turkmenistan State TV,
he died
ON JULY 13



YUSUP TOYLYEV

a surgeon at Koneurgench hospital,
he died
IN MID-JULY



BAYRAMKLYCH URAZOV

former chairman of the Turkmenistan
State Statistics Committee,
he died
IN MID-JULY



VACHO BUTUNS

a pensioner from Mary,
he died
IN MID-JULY



MARGARITA SENCHENKO

a teacher
at Ashgabat gymnasium No. 27,
she died
IN MID-JULY



ISMAIL JUMAEV
an Honoured Artist of Turkmenistan,

he died
ON JULY 16



HASAN METKULIEV
head of Farap district, Lebap region,

he died
ON JULY 18



YEKATERINA GLUKHOVA
a resident of Abadan,

she died
ON JULY 20



TAMARA KHYDYRKULIEVA
a family doctor
at Ashgabat polyclinic No. 8,
she died

ON JULY 20



SERGEY KAHIMOV
a driver
at the Mary special boarding school,
he died

ON JULY 22



MUHAMMET KESHIKOV
an Honoured Trainer of Turkmenistan,

he died
ON JULY 24



AHMET MAMENOV
a retired police colonel,

he died
ON JULY 24



ORAZMURAT BEKMAMMEDOV
owner of the firm Ovadan Ulke,

he died
ON JULY 25



IKRAMGULY JUMAGULYEV
a teacher
at Ashgabat agriculture university,
he died

ON JULY 26



OGULGEREK ANNAEVA
a school teacher in Yasmansalyk,

she died
ON JULY 26



VIKTOR CHERNYAKOV
a pensioner and former employee
of Mary music school,
he died

IN LATE JULY



ELINA GRIGORYANTS
an employee
of the Republican Music School,
she died

IN LATE JULY



TACHMURAD RAHIMOV

director of the Hilal firm in Dashoguz,

he died
IN LATE JULY



VALENTINA MASLENNIKOVA

a pensioner from Ashgabat,

she died
ON JULY 31



TAMARA KAMALOVA

a paediatrician
at the Mary maternity hospital,
she died

IN EARLY AUGUST



**KURBANMUHAMMED
MUHAMMEDOV**

a driver for the OSCE Center in Ashgabat,
he died

ON AUGUST 2



BAYRAM KERBABAEV

the head
of the Medical University's histology
department, he died

ON AUGUST 8



LARISA KAN

a teacher
at Kindergarten No. 26 in Dashoguz,
she died

ON AUGUST 9



EZIZ ANNAMUHAMEDOV

a teacher at School No. 10 in
Sakarchage district, Mary region,
he died

ON AUGUST 9



ENE KULIEVA

head of the public health awareness
department at the AIDS center in Balkanabat,
she died

ON AUGUST 12



BAYRAMDURDY SAPAROV

a former obstetrician and gynaecologist
in Mary region, he died
in prison colony LB-K/11 in Lebap region

ON AUGUST 14



NURTACH NURMEDOVA

a former employee
of the Ministry of the Textile Industry,
she died

ON AUGUST 17



SONA CHERKEZOVA

an infectious diseases doctor at the
infectious diseases hospital in hoganly,
she died

ON AUGUST 18



RUSTAM HAMIDOV

a surgeon
at the district hospital in Kerki,
he died

IN LATE AUGUST



ROZUMBAY DOVLETOV

a teacher
at School No. 42 in Akdepe,
he died

ON DECEMBER 7



IMAM AKYEV

an Honoured Tennis Coach
of Turkmenistan,
he died

ON DECEMBER 13



DOVRAN GARAEV

an operator
at the Dovletabat gas field,
he died

ON DECEMBER 16



ATABALLY GURBANOV

an anaesthetist from Turkmenbashi,

he died

ON DECEMBER 17



NARKULY JORAYEV

a resident of Dostluk in Lebap region,

he died

ON DECEMBER 21

2021 (8 PEOPLE)



HALDURDY GUJUKBAEV

a cardiologist
at the Oncology Center,
he died

ON JANUARY 1



SERGEY LOPUKHOV

a worker in films,

he died

ON JANUARY 7



MARAL MERETLIEVA

a teacher at the Medical University's
military training department,
she died

ON JANUARY 9

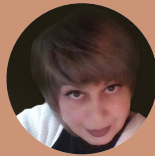


REJEP REJEPOV

an Honoured Artist of Turkmenistan,

he died

ON JANUARY 10



ENEJAN DURDYEVA

an ENT doctor at the medical center
at Ashgabat airport,
she died

ON JANUARY 19



HESEL AMANOVA

a former employee
of the Turkmenistan Women's Union,
she died

ON JANUARY 28



MALIKNIYAZ HOJANIYAZOV

director
of the Salgym mountaineering club,
he died

ON JANUARY 28



YAZMURAD YAZOV

an infectious diseases doctor
at the military hospital in Dashoguz,
he died

ON FEBRUARY 24

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- 13 «В Туркменистане возможно выявлены первые случаи коронавируса», 3 марта 2020 г. <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30466263.html>
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 - 15 «Бердымухамедов призвал лечиться от вирусов народными средствами по своей книге», 14 марта 2020 г. <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/03/yuzarlik-vs-coronavirus/>
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