



WHITE & CASE

IFRC COVID-19 Emergency Decree Pro Bono Research: Turkmenistan

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1. Is there coordination between state and non-state actors, e.g. through a national emergency response mechanism?

It should be generally noted that Turkmenistan is one of the few countries whose government deny the presence of COVID-19 within its borders.¹ That said, the government has implemented a number of emergency measures that appears to address COVID-19 without the involvement of non-state actors.² A summary of the emergency measures is set forth in the remainder of this questionnaire.

It should also be noted that Turkmenistan has banned the use of the word “coronavirus” effective March 31, 2020.³ The word has been removed from health information brochures and the state-controlled media are no longer allowed to use this term. This restriction has given powers to authorities to arrest any individual using the term “coronavirus” in conversations as well as individuals wearing face masks in public spaces. The coordination between state and non-state actors has been further weakened by the imposition of this measure as citizens of Turkmenistan have found themselves having limited access to information regarding the COVID-19 epidemic.

The weak coordination between state and non-state actors can also be drawn from the lack of communication between the state authorities and Turkmen citizens currently attempting to return to Turkmenistan. For instance, the Turkmen embassy in Moscow currently remains unresponsive with regards to Turkmen citizens’ requests to be allowed back to their country as a result of restrictions being imposed by Russia to contain the spread of COVID-19.

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Despite having banned the use of the term “coronavirus” on March, 31 2020, the approach of the Turkmen government remains unclear. Media sources have reported on April 1, 2020 that the Health Minister has set up a telephone hotline for citizens wishing to learn more about coronavirus. This would suggest the term “coronavirus” has not entirely been forbidden in the country.⁵

¹ What is known about coronavirus in Turkmenistan at the moment, Turkmenistan Chronicle, March 20, 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/03/covid-situation-in-tm/> (Accessed through Google Translate on March 31, 2020).

² For example, Turkmenistan sealed off its capital, Ashgabat, without any public announcement. Virus? What Virus? Turkmenistan Seals Off Capital, Restricts Travel, But Doesn’t Mention COVID-19, RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty, March 20, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-restricts-traffic-between-regions-but-doesn-t-mention-coronavirus/30499454.html>.

³ Reporters Without Borders, Turkmenistan bans the word “coronavirus”, March 31, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/news/turkmenistan-bans-word-coronavirus>.

⁴ Reporters Without Borders, Turkmenistan bans the word “coronavirus”, March 31, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/news/turkmenistan-bans-word-coronavirus>.

⁵ Turkmenistan has not banned “coronavirus”, Eurasianet, April 1, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-turkmenistan-has-not-banned-coronavirus>.

2. Is there mention of the role of Red Cross (RC) or humanitarian actors? In what areas/sectors? What responsibilities are ascribed to RC?

The International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) in Turkmenistan works in close collaboration with the Red Crescent Society of Turkmenistan (RCST), following an agreement between the IFRC and the government of Turkmenistan signed on May 6, 2015.⁶ The RCST was created in 1926, being one of the first humanitarian organizations in the country. Despite the objective of the RCST, as part of its mandate, to assist the state in protecting citizens' health and perform health-educational work,⁷ there is no evidence that the RCST has taken measures to fight the spread of COVID-19 specifically. However, the RCST carried out an event on March 13, 2020 aimed at setting out its role in the prevention of diseases. During this event, speakers drew attention to the preventive measures being taken by the National Red Crescent Society of Turkmenistan, specifically in order to stop the spread of diseases among the population.⁸

3. Are there exceptions to travel restrictions that will facilitate the movement of RC/humanitarian relief teams and/or aid across borders? What (if any) quarantine requirements or other conditions are attached?

Turkmenistan has barred admission to all travelers except Turkmenistan citizens returning home, foreign citizens department to their home countries, and diplomats on a case-by-case basis if flights are available. There are no scheduled international flights out of Turkmenistan, including medical evacuation flights. Any privately arranged international charter flight, including medevac flights, must use the Turkmenabat Airport. Passengers will be required to undergo medical screening and possibly involuntary quarantine at local medical facilities.⁹

In addition, there are certain restrictions on movement within Turkmenistan. Since March 20, 2020, the capital of Ashgabat has been sealed off by authorities and travel between Turkmenistan's provinces has been restricted by setting up checkpoints on highways to enforce these restrictions.¹⁰ The authorities have also suspended the movement of freight transport through the country until May 1, 2020.¹¹ The city of Serhetabad has been closed for entry and exit since March 25, 2020.¹²

The government has also ordered medical teams to check body temperatures of passengers boarding intercity flights, trains and buses and to prevent passengers who have "fever and symptoms" to board, transferring them to nearby hospitals instead.¹³

There are exceptions to such restrictions for vehicles carrying food supplies and other cargo into Ashgabat¹⁴, as well as persons traveling for emergency medical reasons, family weddings, funerals and visiting sick relatives, provided

⁶ IFRC and Government of Turkmenistan sign agreement, commit to strengthened cooperation, IFRC, May 14, 2015 <https://www.ifrc.org/en/news-and-media/news-stories/europe-central-asia/turkmenistan/ifrc-and-government-of-turkmenistan-sign-agreement-commit-to-strengthened-cooperation-68643/>.

⁷ Auxiliary Role of the National Society of the Red Crescent of Turkmenistan in Humanitarian Area, National Red Crescent Society of Turkmenistan, <http://www.tgymj.gov.tm/en/abaut-us>.

⁸ Activities aimed at the Prevention of Diseases, National Red Crescent Society of Turkmenistan, March 12, 2020, <http://www.tgymj.gov.tm/en/news/9-news/604-13-03-2020-activities-aimed-at-the-prevention-of-diseases>.

⁹ U.S. Department of State, Turkmenistan Travel Advisory, March 31, 2020, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/turkmenistan-travel-advisory.html>.

¹⁰ Virus? What Virus? Turkmenistan Seals Off Capital, Restricts Travel, But Doesn't Mention COVID-19, RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty, March 20, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-restricts-traffic-between-regions-but-doesn-t-mention-coronavirus/30499454.html>.

¹¹ COVID-19: Moscow has App to Monitor Quarantine; Belarus Denies First Fatality, RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty, April 1, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-cancels-order-coronavirus-mask-shortage/30521286.html>.

¹² What is known about coronavirus in Turkmenistan at the moment, Turkmenistan Chronicle, March 20, 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/03/covid-situation-in-tm/> (Accessed through Google Translate on March 31, 2020).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Virus? What Virus? Turkmenistan Seals Off Capital, Restricts Travel, But Doesn't Mention COVID-19, RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty, March 20, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-restricts-traffic-between-regions-but-doesn-t-mention-coronavirus/30499454.html>.

that such persons hold a letter from local authorities confirming their reason for travel.¹⁵ There is no specific reference to such exceptions being applicable to RC/humanitarian relief teams, although the exception for traveling for emergency medical reasons may be available to such relief teams if the teams were to obtain the requisite letters.

4. Are there exceptions to quarantines, curfews and other restrictions on movement that allow RC/humanitarian organizations access to vulnerable populations (including for psychosocial or non-medical aid)?

Other than the travel restrictions and exceptions set out in Question 3 above, there does not appear to be any curfews or other restrictions on movement. However, due to state-imposed restrictions on access to information regarding COVID-19, it is not clear whether there are any other curfews or restrictions (or any exceptions thereto) on movement that impact RC/humanitarian organizations' ability to access vulnerable populations.

5. Have any special legal facilities or exemptions been put in place for the importation of medical aid or other relief items or personnel (International Disaster Response Law)? What (if any) quarantine requirements or other conditions are attached?

Due to state-imposed restrictions on access to information regarding COVID-19, it is not clear whether there are any special legal facilities being put in place for the importation of medical aid or other relief items or personnel. However, as set out in Question 3 and Question 4, there is an exception to the travel restrictions within Turkmenistan for emergency medical reasons, and it may be possible for personnel delivering medical aid and other relief to qualify for such exception. Furthermore, according to Turkmen media sources, Turkmenistan currently has specific medical institutions treating quarantined patients and owns sufficient medical supplies and protective equipment to face the threats posed by the spread of COVID-19.¹⁶

6. Is the RC (or humanitarian organizations) categorized as 'essential' or 'emergency' services, for the purposes of exemptions to restrictions on business operations and opening hours?

As noted in Question 4 above, there does not appear to be any curfews or other restrictions on business operations.

7. What other measures are provided in the emergency decrees? (for governmental actors, for communities, for health workers, etc).

Restaurants, cafes and fitness clubs are closed and all sporting events have been cancelled since March 24, 2020.¹⁷

8. Have restrictions been adopted or put in place that ban the export of protective medical equipment?

Due to state-imposed restrictions on access to information regarding COVID-19, it is not clear whether any restrictions have been adopted or put in place for the export of protective medical equipment.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Turkmenistan takes measures to prevent coronavirus outbreak in country, Akipress, April 1, 2020, https://akipress.com/news:638593:Turkmenistan_takes_measures_to_prevent_coronavirus_outbreak_in_country/.

¹⁷ What is known about coronavirus in Turkmenistan at the moment, Turkmenistan Chronicle, March 20, 2020, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/03/covid-situation-in-tm/> (Accessed through Google Translate on March 31, 2020).