

Three months after the global pandemic, COVID-19 has now been detected in the country. Experts emphasize that while the neighbouring countries have passed the critical phase of fighting the virus and are gradually beginning to ease the quarantine, the difficulties for Tajikistan are only ahead.

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The day before the arrival of the delegation of the World Health Organization (WHO), the Tajik authorities “suddenly” identified 15 cases of coronavirus in the country.

According to officials, to date, 15 cases of infection with the new coronavirus have been detected in the country. Of these, 10 cases were recorded in the Sughd region in the north of the country, and 5 cases in Dushanbe.



*Kohir Rasulzoda. Photo: president.kg*

These statements were made on April 30 at the meeting of the Republican commission for strengthening anti-epidemic measures, which is headed by the Prime Minister Kohir Rasulzoda.

According to the state news agency “Khovar”, the commission announced summer holidays for 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students of Tajik universities from 4<sup>th</sup> of May. Their grades will be based on previous results.

University graduates, ahead of the schedule, must pass their exams by May 15.

Also the commission established that wearing face masks in public is mandatory for all citizens of the country. In contrast to the neighbouring countries, the commission refrained from introducing countrywide quarantine following the example of other countries.

To this day, the authorities do not provide additional comments on this issue.

Nothing is known about the identities of those 15 who contracted the disease. It is also unknown whether the pandemic has led to fatalities in the country.

Repeated appeals of the journalist of CABAR.asia to the Ministry of Health and Social Protection and Commission on strengthening the anti-epidemic measures did not give results.

The Ministry of Health stated that according to the established rules, they collect all the information related to the coronavirus and publish it following the approval by the Presidential Apparatus every evening. Note that according to the WHO's regulations, countries must report new coronavirus cases within 24 hours.

Government's acknowledgement came amid citizens' concerns about the mysterious deaths and the reaction of the authorities to these events.

The death of several residents of the Jabbor Rasulov district in Sughd region in early April, was the first resonant event. Following that, several other citizens died or fell ill. Authorities in all cases stated that the reason of the death or the illness was not caused by COVID-19. In the meantime, authorities controlled the funeral rites of the dead and people in special protective clothing buried the bodies. All this increased the suspicions of Tajik citizens and many wondered: "why such measures, if there is no new coronavirus?"

Read more: [Tajikistan: an epidemic of pneumonia or is it coronavirus after all?](#)

### **Is the recognition by the authorities related to the visit of WHO delegation?**

Commission's recognition about the presence of coronavirus was made before the planned arrival of the WHO delegation on May 1.

It was assumed that when examining the situation on the ground, WHO's experts could find out that the real picture with COVID-19 is not as optimistic as depicted by the Tajik authorities. In this case, their reputation would be damaged and they could lose the support of the international community.

"Look, right after the visit of WHO delegation was revealed, the



authorities began to gradually prepare the public for the news about the presence of coronavirus”, - says one Tajik expert, who wished to remain anonymous.

*The latest meeting of the government. Photo: Press service of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan*

According to him, on 25<sup>th</sup> of April, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan announced a two-week vacation in schools and kindergartens to prevent the coronavirus pandemic. In the same evening, the Republican commission announced about the ban of all public events. The export of flour, wheat, eggs and meat was also banned. On April 29, Sughd region introduced a quarantine for the activities of entertainment centers, canteens, restaurants, hairdressers, sports and other facilities that lead to crowding of people.

### **The Ministry of Health was accused of “negligence”**

The authorities’ acknowledgement of the presence of coronavirus did not mitigate the criticism towards the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Tajikistan. Some doctors believe that in the situation with the coronavirus the Ministry of Health demonstrated “incompetence, unresponsiveness, unprofessionalism and negligence”.

“The events of the recent days have shown us incompetence, unresponsiveness, lack of professionalism and negligence of the country’s Ministry of Health and other people responsible in this area. I think that it is not me, and not now an assessment will be given of their activities,” wrote Mukaddas Umarova, a doctor of diagnostic and treatment center “Shifo”, on her Facebook page.

Umarova proposed to replace the members of the Commission for prevention of the coronavirus with “energetic, knowledgeable specialists among the epidemiologists, health care organizers and infectious disease specialists”.

“As soon as possible, develop a system for diagnosis and treatment of patients with COVID-19 and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) on the basis of infectious departments of national hospitals,” said Umarova (original spelling retained).

She also emphasized the need for maximum transparency of the notification system, informing citizens about the number of sick and dead.

Abror Asoev, another medical worker with 20 years of experience, adds that the Ministry of Health has lost valuable time.

“Since the emergence of the virus in China, Tajikistan has had almost five months to prepare for its appearance on its territory. However, apart from the window dressing, such as the cancellation of the flights to China, nothing else has been done,” says Asoev.

According to him, the events of the last week demonstrate that Tajikistan is not prepared for the fight against coronavirus, even at the same level as neighbouring countries. For instance, there are not enough hospital beds.

“In Khujand, the largest provincial hospital was even allocated for infectious patients. In Dushanbe, “Istiklol”, “Pervii Sovetski” and “Mansurov Clinic” are full”, noted Asoev.

According to the doctor, almost every day he hears reports of deaths from pneumonia, which has “similar” signs as COVID-19.





Photo: CABAR.asia

“Doctors talk about the lack of protective equipment, people are already collecting food for the doctors. Where are all those preparations that the Ministry of Health is talking about since January?” - wonders Asoev.

Earlier, users of social media expressed confusion about how the Ministry of Health managed to detect 15 coronavirus infected cases at once. They bring to attention that in Europe, North America and even in Central Asian countries, the pandemic began with the infection of two to three people.

Asoev agrees with these critical observations.

“Only on April 29, the day before the visit of WHO delegation, the Ministry of Health detects

15 cases of infection at once. Isn't that doubtful? - says Asoev.



*Disinfection in Khujand. Photo: Photo by the press service of Mayor of the Khujand city*

Despite of acknowledging the presence of coronavirus, authorities are not hurrying to declare quarantine. Some of the chief hospital doctors say that Tajikistan can survive the epidemic without quarantine.

For instance, Abdukhalil Kholikzoda, the head of the board of directors of "Ibn Sino" clinic in Dushanbe, states that people can avoid being infected with the coronavirus by following basic hygiene rules.

"Do not be afraid and panic. You must observe hygiene rules, such as regular and thoroughly wash your hands, use antiseptic and wear a mask, maintain a social distance and do not touch your face with your hands. But if you are infected, do not panic - coronavirus is not so deadly", - said Kholikzoda in an interview with Radio Ozodi.

He predicted that this pandemic would last for a maximum of two months and "there is no reason to panic."

Experts believe that introduction of quarantine in Tajikistan is a needed measure, but they doubt that the government will decide to take such action. One of the interlocutors of CABAR.asia reminds that many people in Tajikistan live on one-day earnings.

"The government does not have special funds to help people, and therefore the likelihood is high that it will not declare a quarantine," he said.

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*This article was prepared as part of the Giving Voice, Driving Change - from the Borderland to the Steppes Project.*

Coronavirus in Tajikistan: Authorities are not demonstrating decisiveness yet



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