

Region's business conditions during the coronavirus pandemic.

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### **Coronavirus in Tajikistan: Finding Compromise Between Safety and Money**

Despite the coronavirus pandemic threat, most companies and enterprises in Tajikistan continue to work as normal.

However, most Tajik companies voluntarily take preventative measures to counter COVID-19 spread.

Tajik authorities denied the presence of coronavirus disease in the republic for a long time. However, even after the virus detection in the country, authorities do not introduce quarantine measures.

Under these conditions, most business entities are trying to work as normal. Only companies and organizations related to tourism, hotel business and aviation services have completely suspended or reduced their activities. These companies did not have other choice: there were simply no customers due to the borders closure.



*Tajik authorities denied the presence of coronavirus disease in the republic for a long time. Photo: CABAR.asia*

Therefore, companies send their employees either on paid or unpaid leave.

For example, many Dushanbe hotels (Hyatt Regency, Hilton) have completely suspended their activities; others have reduced their activities and sent most of their employees on leave.

“It is very difficult, but we are trying to handle it. Now, only 50 our employees are working, 100 people are on annual paid leave,” five-star Dushanbe Serena Hotel told CABAR.asia.

Most employees of this hotel are locals; several foreigners also work here.

“The local employees’ salaries were slightly reduced, but we cut the salaries of foreign employees,” the Dushanbe Serena Hotel emphasized.

Employees in the aviation industry complain that they were sent on indefinite unpaid leave.

“We have been on unpaid leave for a long time, but we have to provide for our families somehow. We addressed the administration regarding any compensation, but have not received a positive response yet,” one of the Dushanbe airport employees anonymously told CABAR.asia.



*Dushanbe International Airport. Photo: airport.tj*

According to him, the airport administration claims that the possibilities of providing compensation to employees are being considered now, but they do not promise anything specific.

Of course, there are private companies in the republic that allowed employees to self-isolate and work remotely. However, there are few such companies, and they are not manufacturing companies.

Most enterprises and organizations operate as normal under the pressure of the authorities.

However, due to the coronavirus threat, almost all companies take preventive measures: take the temperature of employees when they come to work, disinfect their hands and require wearing masks.

The authorities' attitude towards the existing situation is quite convenient for the companies that are able to self-isolate and protect themselves, while people work for them.

“Entrepreneurs are primarily concerned about money. In any case, they can hire other workers. The main thing for them is their business,” economist Akbar Saidov believes.

According to him, the authorities act by the same principle.

“We should note where the authorities did not report infection cases: North Korea, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan ... This is a perfect example of the fact that these countries do not worry about the public health,” the economist said.

Some sources close to the Tajik authorities explain their silence as “preventing social panic”. However, an anonymous financial analyst strongly disagrees with such arguments.

“The authorities worry only about the business performance and about the budget, which should receive the necessary money. Indeed, more than 70% of the state budget revenues

are generated by taxes. Imagine what would happen if, for example, the tax holidays are announced as in other countries. The country would be bankrupt, as it does not have any reserves or special funds for such cases," the analyst believes.

More than 70% of the state budget revenues are generated by taxes

In addition, small businesses and individual entrepreneurs, who, apparently, worry more about their incomes than about their safety, have not suspended their activities.

"We have to work and earn as much as possible, while taking safety measures. Eventually, quarantine will be introduced, and we do not know how long it will last. Therefore, it is necessary to make money and stock up on food now, so that we do not starve later," says entrepreneur Sayyod Rashidov.

According to the interviewed entrepreneurs, they rely on themselves only and therefore have to work.

*"The authorities will not help anyone, because they care only about their safety, and at best, about their inner circle," anonymously said one of the entrepreneurs in Dushanbe.*

Meanwhile, some international human rights organizations claim that countries such as Tajikistan and Turkmenistan pose a serious threat to the public health by not providing information about the coronavirus.

The Human Rights Watch (HRW) states that these countries did not introduce quarantine and did not encourage social distancing in any way. Human rights activists of this organization conclude that the governments of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan violate human rights by their actions during the coronavirus pandemic.

### **Quarantine Put Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises at the Verge of Bankruptcy in Uzbekistan**

Uzbek authorities are doing almost nothing to support small and medium-sized enterprises during the coronavirus pandemic.

On April 27, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a decree on the measures for support of the population and business during the quarantine. State support mainly provides for preferential taxation, not for any payments during the coronavirus pandemic.

On March 19, the first set of anti-crisis measures for business support was adopted.

Entrepreneurs were granted tax holidays until October 1. Later, authorities [reduced](#) the prepayments for gas and electricity to 30% and forbade declaring bankruptcy and freezing companies' accounts.

Victoria Chugai, founder of the publishing and bookselling Asian Book House in Tashkent, said that despite these measures, the State Tax Committee demanded to pay taxes in advance, and then granted a deferment for two months until June 2020.

“Our only request was to postpone the taxes payments, since there is no turnover, and accordingly, profit. I was advised to address the Tax Committee, where I was granted a deferment until June. Then, I have either to pay or to close down,” she said.



Victoria Chugai. Photo from personal Facebook page

Amid the lack of state assistance, the small businesses are on the verge of bankruptcy. One of the restaurant owners anonymously told that the few restaurants and cafes that were working for delivery now, actually operated at a loss.

According to him, even chain restaurants are not confident that they will be able to open after quarantine, not to mention small restaurants.

The source says that some landlords do not accommodate business requests and do not reduce rental rates.

*“The frightening unknown future is ahead!” he concludes.*

Certain categories of entrepreneurs were allowed to work. For example, beekeepers were allowed to go to the bee farms after the Beekeepers Association addressed the government.

“We had to address the authorities, since the spring works on the farms are the most important and they define the next year for beekeepers. We received permission only three weeks later. Some of the bees died, some flew away,” a beekeeper says anonymously.

The entrepreneur relies only on himself during the crisis.



*Car maintenance services were allowed to work during quarantine. Photo: gazeta.uz*

Another category that was granted the right to work during quarantine was car maintenance services. However, everything is complicated. Entrepreneurs have to equip their centers in accordance with sanitary and epidemiological standards, purchase non-contact thermometers, protective suits and equipment for cars disinfection. In addition, specialists of the Sanitary-Epidemiology Surveillance should disinfect all premises on a paid basis twice a month.

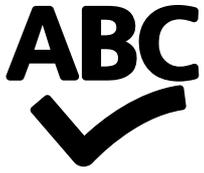
Having fulfilled all the requirements, one of the companies in Tashkent opened their service centers for customers on April 27. On the first day, they all were forced to close.

“The City Hall states that there is no decision on these centers, although the Sanitary-Epidemiology Surveillance has allowed their work,” says CABAR.asia source.

According to him, even if the service centers are opened, this measure is useless without customers, most of whom are forbidden to drive private cars.

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



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