

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

## COVID-19 and Human Rights Violations in Mongolia

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There are three main approaches which countries are employing in their fight against the novel coronavirus depending on their capacity.

The first plan of action is for a government not to take any specific measures, but only advise its residents to take certain actions while implementing special countermeasures only when domestic infections are detected. The second involves implementing limited quarantines, cancelling public events and activities, and advising residents not to go to public places and shortening working hours for most public institutions. The third approach entails the use of strict quarantines prohibiting access to all public entertainment venues and not allowing residents to leave their homes except under limited circumstances.

Mongolia has fought against COVID-19 by enacting a limited quarantine for the last three months. Mongolia borders China, where the first infections were detected, with a land border totaling 4,630 km (2880 miles). In the north, the border with Russia extends nearly as far. Russia has recently experienced a dramatic surge in COVID-19 cases and is facing considerable difficulty in containing the spread of the disease. Even though Mongolia borders these two nations and has been assessed to be “very high” risk by the domestic health authorities, as of April 20<sup>th</sup>, there have only been 32 documented cases in the country.<sup>1</sup> All of the 32 cases have been designated as “imported from foreign countries” and contained as there have been no reported cases of community spread. As of the time of this writing, seven patients have been released from hospitals with zero deaths.

### **Human rights issues in Mongolia in connection to the COVID-19 crisis: Mongolian citizens stranded abroad**

The Mongolian government has set the goal of not leaving any citizens stranded abroad.<sup>2</sup> To achieve this goal, the relevant authorities have been organizing evacuations via the Russian Federation, Germany, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. The citizens are being brought back on charter flights carrying 250-270 passengers at a time as well as other land transportation means. The flight costs are paid by the passengers themselves. As of today,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ikon.mn/n/1tb5>

<sup>2</sup> <https://montsame.mn/mn/read/219253>

approximately 6,000 citizens have been evacuated to Mongolia. All evacuees have been subject to tests, monitoring, and 21-day quarantines. When the system was first implemented, a 14-day quarantine was set for all returnees. However, this period was lengthened to 21 days in accordance with the recommendations of the World Health Organization.

The number of people who have submitted a request to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Mongolian consulates to urgently return to Mongolia is around 6,000. The Foreign Minister of Mongolia, D. Tsogtbaatar, reports<sup>3</sup> that there are approximately 170,000 Mongolian citizens outside of the country.

According to Constitution of Mongolia, the Mongolian government has a duty to protect the health and safety of its citizens and to provide them with all necessary resources to survive and return to their homeland. However, due to the nature of COVID-19, a hot debate has emerged in Mongolian society over exactly what this duty encompasses. While one side argues that the State must fulfill its constitutional obligation to ensure the safety of all of its citizens, the opposing side argues that the interests of the few should not jeopardize the safety of the majority. The latter stance seems to be held by the majority of the Mongolian public. In a statement, S. Erdene, MP and Opposition leader, declared that he is “strongly opposing the importation of infections from abroad,”<sup>4</sup> further fueling the debate.

### **Quarantine regime**

Like many other Asian nations, Mongolia was slated to hold traditional Lunar New Year festivities from February 24-27. However, the celebrations this year were very different as a nationwide quarantine was put in place, thus restricting the flow of people inside the country. This was the first time a nationwide travel restriction was implemented since the democratic transition in 1990 (previously, travel restrictions were only implemented in a limited manner and in specific regions due to the outbreak of highly contagious animal diseases such as foot and mouth disease). Although most Mongolians had limited opportunities to meet with their relatives during the festivities, there were no large scale oppositions to the government measure as the slogan “health and safety first” prevailed.

### **Crime**

In the first quarter of 2020, the National Police Agency received 1,911 phone calls reporting domestic violence, which is an increase of 48.7 percent compared to last year. Although the reported numbers of domestic violence incidents are extremely unfortunate, the overall crime rate has decreased by 19.2 percent<sup>5</sup> compared to the same period in the previous year. This is directly related to the quarantine regime.

### **Education**

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<sup>3</sup> <https://mass.mn/n/62602>

<sup>4</sup> <https://gereg.mn/news/46844>

<sup>5</sup> [http://police.gov.mn/a/5013?fbclid=IwAR3n3K3JNYT-m0ffZqUS2qxtKtdk5uGD01hZ3-0Vqfl\\_mboJxRIoMvVqz8](http://police.gov.mn/a/5013?fbclid=IwAR3n3K3JNYT-m0ffZqUS2qxtKtdk5uGD01hZ3-0Vqfl_mboJxRIoMvVqz8)

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In accordance with the decision of the government of Mongolia, all schools and kindergartens have been closed since January 20<sup>th</sup>. Alternative platforms such as television and online-based options are being utilized to continue lessons. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of April, the government decided to extend the quarantine and to open schools again on September 1<sup>st</sup>. Yo. Baatarbileg, Minister of Education, Culture, Science and Sports, announced that students would progress into the next grade as usual, and school graduations and enrollment will proceed. Currently, the movement of graduation tests to online-based platforms is also being discussed.

## **Political rights**

Regular parliamentary elections are scheduled to take place on June 24<sup>th</sup> this year. There are conflicting views among researchers and citizens on whether the elections will be held on time. A significant proportion of the population argues that “elections should not be held during a pandemic, voter turnout will not be sufficient, it will increase the rate of infections, and the money budgeted for the elections should be used instead to fight the coronavirus.” However, the ruling party has announced its position that the elections should be held as scheduled.

On March 25<sup>th</sup>, President of Mongolia Kh. Battulga gave a public address<sup>6</sup> where he expressed his concern over the economic and financial impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the country. In his address, he laid out a plan for how the country might combat these issues, stating “Our nation must be prepared to deal with the imminent crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and implement comprehensive measures to overcome it with minimum losses. Therefore, as the President of Mongolia, I recommend taking the six following measures:

First, make changes to the 2020 state budget to cut back on non-essential spending and expenses for upcoming elections to make more money available for coronavirus-related measures.

Second, postpone the 2020 Parliamentary elections scheduled for June 24 to save on election expenses.

Third, establish an ‘Anti-Crisis Fund’ to provide support for factories, small and medium enterprises and self-employed people who are most affected by the coronavirus crisis and develop rules and regulations for the fund’s spending.

Fourth, develop an action plan to maintain the standard of living for the people, especially children, reduce unemployment, mitigate its consequences, and ensure an uninterrupted supply of basic necessities.

Fifth, hold a National Security Council discussion on this matter, and establish a small but competent committee of scholars and experts to prepare and overcome the crisis, and develop a work plan and schedule.

Sixth, centralize public administration during crisis situations. This does not imply an endorsement of dictatorship under any circumstances, but it is an unavoidable step to take."

The sixth point of the President’s address was of particular note. His heavy emphasis on how he did not intend to intimidate the people using the crisis has raised many eyebrows. Many analysts have argued that "centralizing power" could be an attempt to undermine democracy, human rights, and freedoms in Mongolia.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <https://montsame.mn/en/read/220192>

<sup>7</sup> <https://news.mn/r/2280165/>

## Conclusion

Mongolia has extensive experience in imposing limited quarantines in provinces and regions due to the long struggle of combating diseases and plagues associated with livestock. This has considerably helped Mongolia's fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The public's familiarity with containment measures against livestock-related diseases has had a positive effect on the psychological preparedness and discipline among the Mongolian population.

In the opinion of the Academy of Political Education, there are no major ethical issues in Mongolia other than human rights violations related to domestic violence which have arisen due to the COVID-19 pandemic at this time.

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