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To: WHO Regional Director for Europe **Hans Kluge**

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**Dear Dr Kluge,**

As representatives of Turkmenistan's civil society, we ask you to consider this letter an open appeal to you personally and to your organization, and very much hope you will respond.

We express our serious concern that the government of Turkmenistan is still denying the presence of COVID-19 in the country and concealing the scale of morbidity and mortality.

According to figures from unofficial sources, mainly health workers, coronavirus is circulating in Turkmenistan and another wave of infections is now under way. We know the names of dozens of people who had all the symptoms of COVID-19 and are thought to have died as a consequence of coronavirus. We are convinced that the number of deaths from COVID-19 is far higher, but it is not possible to confirm the cause of death as coronavirus, as relatives and health workers are afraid to share information. There are also no objective conclusions about the patients' cause of death.

But despite the high number of hospitalizations of citizens diagnosed with "pneumonia", the authorities of Turkmenistan still do not acknowledge the presence of COVID-19. Nevertheless, they demand that citizens wear masks and observe social distancing and hygiene norms. When these measures were introduced in 2020, the Turkmen authorities said they were to deal with dust carried by the wind from the dried-up bed of the Aral Sea. The governments of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, in which countries the sea is located, have not reported and are not reporting any "deadly dust from the Aral Sea." There is no information whatsoever in Turkmenistan's media about COVID-19 and the risks to Turkmen citizens posed by the possibility of infection, illness and death from coronavirus.

We are convinced that it is the state bodies' denial since 2020 of COVID-19 in Turkmenistan and the ban on the free dissemination and receipt of information in our country that have resulted in public ignorance about the imminent threat. These are some of the main reasons for the growing number of COVID-19 cases and deaths.

According to reports from numerous sources, hospitals are overflowing in the capital and the regions. Most people cannot afford to stay in hospital. People who do not have the means to pay are sent away with instructions for treatment at home. Local authorities are allocating land for the expansion of cemeteries or creation of new ones.

Turkish specialists confirmed that the death in July 2020 in Ashgabat of an employee of the Turkish embassy, Kemal Uckun, was related to COVID-19. Almost all foreign diplomatic representations in

Turkmenistan temporarily suspended work and stopped receiving citizens in person, which is indirect confirmation that coronavirus is widespread in the country.

In July 2020, after lengthy coordination with the Turkmen government, WHO representatives were allowed into the country. But Turkmenistan's authorities deliberately arranged a program for the WHO that unfortunately did not enable them to draw objective conclusions about the true COVID-19 situation in the country. We would also like to remind you that, despite the promise made to the WHO in 2020, the government of Turkmenistan has still not provided samples from patients in Turkmenistan for testing in independent laboratories.

Dr Kluge, the WHO is part of an authoritative international organization and we have no doubt that you and your colleagues are quite well informed about what is happening in Turkmenistan in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the WHO has a permanent office in our country.

We consider it essential for the WHO to make an official, public appeal to Turkmenistan in order to honor the following principles set out in the preamble to the WHO Constitution:

- *“Governments have a responsibility for the health of their peoples which can be fulfilled only by the provision of adequate health and social measures.”*
- *“Informed opinion and active co-operation on the part of the public are of the utmost importance in the improvement of the health of the people.”*

We consider it essential for the WHO to make an official, public appeal to the government of Turkmenistan to fulfill their promise on the testing of samples from patients in Turkmenistan in independent laboratories. This would be an important step towards Turkmenistan acknowledging the circulation of the COVID-19 pandemic on its territory.

We are convinced that this is the only way to begin an effective fight against COVID-19 in our country and, using international help organized by the WHO, to save the lives of thousands of our compatriots.

We look forward to hearing your views and an explanation of the WHO position on this matter.

Yours sincerely,

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