

Brief Overview
of the Activities against COVID-19 Pandemic Implemented in Georgia
(for diplomatic corps)

*Prepared by the Ministry of IDPs from the Occupied Territories,
Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia (MoIDPLHSA)*

Epidemiological situation

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 was registered in Georgia on February 26. As of June 17, there are 888 confirmed novel coronavirus cases (all cases of COVID-19 infection in Georgia were confirmed by PCR testing); 731 – recovered, 14 – fatal outcome (fatality rate 1.6), 2710 – under quarantine and 267 – under hospital supervision.

During the period from January 30 to June 17 PCR method testing was conducted on the first samples of 79,843 possible cases. In total, the number of confirmed cases is 1.1%, which indicates that the quality of case detection in the country is quite high and probability that timely detection of cases cannot occur is low.

Epidemiological analysis shows that the virus is most prevalent among age group of 30-69 years (64%). The average age of mortality is 74.

Main statistical data on COVID-19 is available at the governmental website – www.StopCov.ge.

Chronology of main restrictions introduced by the Government of Georgia and gradual lifting

In response to the rapid spread of infectious disease caused by the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) emerged in Wuhan (Hubei Province, China), on December 31st 2019 and for the prevention of the spread of COVID-19 cases in Georgia, the Government of Georgia took significant steps within a month before the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed.

- ⇒ **January 23** – By the decision of the Prime Minister an Interagency Coordination Council was established to efficiently respond to COVID-19 outbreak.
- ⇒ **January 25** – Thermal screening started at airports. Gradually, all border checkpoints were equipped with the necessary thermal screening devices. Information leaflets were prepared for the passengers arriving from the novel Coronavirus transmission areas.
- ⇒ **January 28** – Decree of the Government of Georgia #164 on “Approval of Measures to Prevent the Possible Spread of the New Coronavirus in Georgia and Approval of an Emergency Response Plan for Cases Caused by COVID-19” has been adopted (amended on February 26, with the GoG Decree #377), which determined the measures of response at the national level and responsibilities and duties of the relevant structures.
- ⇒ **January 29** – Travel flights to and from China, Iran (February 23-26), Italy (March 4) were suspended and from March 14-16 travelling to and from neighboring countries was gradually stopped. From March 18, all foreign nationals’ entrance in Georgia was banned.

- ⇒ **February 21** - The gradual return of Georgian citizens to their homeland from different countries started (the first charter flight was from China).
- ⇒ **February 26** - The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Georgia. A Georgian citizen from Iran entered country through the Red Bridge customs border checkpoint. From this date the second stage of measures was launched to slow the spread of new cases.
- ⇒ **March 2** - Educational process, including sports, cultural and social activities were suspended.
- ⇒ **March 12** - Part of the employees have temporarily switched to distance working mode.
- ⇒ **March 12** – Nationwide a state of emergency was declared. Due to the state of emergency, restrictions on international air/maritime/land travel (excluding freight transport) were imposed.
- ⇒ From **March 31st** to **May 22nd** additional restrictions were imposed. Nationwide quarantine and curfew from 21:00 to 06:00 was declared. The public gathering of people was reduced from 10 to 3. The number of passengers, including driver was limited to three while driving by a vehicle.
- ⇒ **April 15** - Entry and exit to four major Georgian cities - Tbilisi, Rustavi, Batumi and Kutaisi were forbidden.
- ⇒ **April 17** - As a part of the State of Emergency, it was completely forbidden to drive a car in the country and enter to the cemetery areas. Restrictions did not apply to the transportation of cargo and distribution vehicles. Also, wearing face masks in closed public spaces, including public transport/taxi became mandatory.
- ⇒ Since the **end of April**, the virus reproduction rate has been <1 and tendency of stabilization of COVID-19 cases was in place. Therefore, the government moved to the third – adaptation stage to fighting the pandemic, which envisaged gradual removal of restrictions.
- ⇒ **April 27** – The first phase of easing restrictions and opening up economy started. Restrictions on movement of cars, online shopping, delivery services and open agrarian markets were lifted.
- ⇒ **May 5** – Activities related to technical service of cars, motorcycles, mopeds and bicycles were allowed.
- ⇒ **May 11** - Any kind of production and extraction; activities of lending entities; activities of household and repair service providers; and functioning of recreation areas were allowed.
- ⇒ **May 18** - Beauty salons and aesthetic medicine centers have been opened; public gathering of people increased from 3 to 10.
- ⇒ **May 23** – Nighttime curfew restriction has been lifted. Restrictions on the movement of more than 3 people by a car (excluding taxi) were also removed. All retail and wholesale shops with street entrances, excluding clothing and shoe shops, were reopened.
- ⇒ **May 29** - All types of municipal transport, including subway, have been opened.
- ⇒ **June 1** - All kinds of (with open/close space) shops, malls, markets and the restaurants with open space were opened.
- ⇒ **June 8** - Restrictions on intercity travel and all type of services in restaurants and hotels have been lifted.
- ⇒ **June 15** – By the Decree #368 of the Government of Georgia the rule of wearing the face mask has been approved.

Healthcare sector readiness to respond COVID-19

The preparation of Georgian healthcare system and prevention of its possible collapse caused by its overload have been identified as a priority of critical importance by the Government of Georgia at an early stage. Therefore, it became necessary to adjust health care system against COVID-19 pandemic.

The planning of the COVID-19 response measures was based on the analysis of scenarios prepared by using epidemic modeling tool, which clearly indicated that without strict social distance measures Georgia's healthcare system would not be able to handle the daily flow of 2,000 or 3,000 infected patients, similar to highly developed European countries.

Considering the limited capacity of the hospital sector, as well as a limited number of resuscitators and infectious disease specialists (employed 488 resuscitators and 256 infectious disease specialists could provide service to only 1,200 critical and 853 infectious patients per day), social distance, isolation, was defined by the MoIDPLHSA as the only efficient way to respond to the COVID-19.

The mentioned evidences and predictions were major precondition of the national COVID-19 cases management policy, which entailed an unprecedented low prevalence of the virus and fewer human casualties.

Based on the recommendations of the World Health Organization and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, on January 31st, the definition of COVID-19 infection cases was approved and the country moved to active surveillance. Emergency operation center was set up at the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health.

From February 6 to February 14, various methodological recommendations and protocols related to COVID-19 were developed and approved, video lectures were launched and educational materials were circulated.

On March 16, the establishment of Clinical case management group of novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) Infectious Disease (COVID-19) was approved, which developed a national guideline for the treatment of COVID-19.

Laboratory diagnostics and testing

Testing with PCR (polymerase chain reaction) method to detect COVID-19 in Georgia began on January 30 at the Richard G. Lugar Center for Public Health Research. The PCR method is considered to be a gold standard in the COVID-19 diagnostics. Its advantages include high sensitivity and specificity, which minimize the risk of false-positive (as well as false-negative) results. In addition to PCR testing, the country is conducting serological studies - rapid simple tests in certain groups based on antigens and antibodies, however, the cases are confirmed only by PCR testing.

In the period from January 30 to March 1, 2020, PCR testing was carried out only by the Lugar Center of the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health. Starting from March 1, other laboratories were gradually involved in the testing process. As of June 17, 15 laboratories were conducting PCR testing.

In order to ensure availability of comprehensive information on COVID-19 testing, the National Center for Disease Control developed the LabCov electronic module for laboratory research, which collects and continuously improves data on COVID -19 testing.

Hospital sector readiness

In accordance with the recommendations of the World Health Organization, the LEPL Regulation Agency for Medical and Pharmaceutical Activities in February conducted an assessment of hospitals readiness in terms of infection control and evaluated conditions and quantity of the ventilators and number of qualified medical staff. In total, 297 inpatient facilities (86% privately owned) operate across the country with 17,514 beds, out of which 2,290 are for intensive care and emergency medical services and own 2043 operating or reserved ventilators. 1749 are suitable for the management of respiratory distress syndrome.

According to the Ministerial Order N 01-119 /O of March 24, all patients with confirmed coronavirus disease of any level of severity are subject to hospitalization. At the first stage, clinics of infectious profile were selected in Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Batumi. By March 26, "COVID clinics" and so-called "Fever Clinics" have been designated in Tbilisi and the regions. From the first day of the epidemic, 9 clinics were mobilized with 826 beds and later, 12 clinics (1247 beds) were prepared for the management of COVID-19 suspicious and confirmed cases. The services provided by Fever Clinics include triage of all fever cases, diagnostics of COVID-19 infection in accordance with the algorithm approved by the MoIDPLHSA, determination of further treatment tactics and referral of confirmed cases to the respective facility by the LEPL Emergency Coordination and Urgent Assistance Center.

Initially, the mobilization of additional clinics was planned in case of confirming more than 800 cases of infection. Considering low number of new COVID-19 cases in May and low rate of hospital loads, the threshold for inclusion in the program of new clinics was increased to 1600 active cases. At the same time, clinics will be able to safely continue providing other services.

In total, 3,279 beds were mobilized across the country to manage COVID-19 and 1,050 beds were distributed in 16 clinics for the management of fever patients (at least one clinic in all regions). In addition, Rukhi and Batumi new clinics have been equipped in accordance with the basic needs and started operating from the beginning of May. As a result, while the World Bank standard envisages 5-7 critical beds and artificial respiration apparatus for the response to Covid-19, in Georgia it is 7.7 and 8.1 per 10,000 inhabitants, respectively (Gottlieb S., Rivers C., etc. National Coronavirus Response: A road Map to Reopening. American Enterprise Institute).

Primary health care and emergency service coordination

In parallel with the preparation of the hospital sector, in order to prevent excessive utilization of emergency service by fever and respiratory symptoms patients and to effectively involve PHC settings in COVID management, a call forwarding service from emergency hotline 112 to family doctors has been set up. The MoIDPLHSA already has the practice of using this model during the flu pandemic. 25 primary PHC settings in Tbilisi and the regions were involved in the program to fully cover the country's population. From June 15 the mentioned PHC facilities started conducting PCR testing.

Quarantine zones

In order to reduce the health risks to the population and spread of the infection, the government started creating quarantine spaces from March 4, which still ensures the placement of suspicious cases or the persons with high risk of the COVID-19. Before the 1st of June, the quarantine zone included 84 hotels

across the country, bringing the total to more than 6,500 rooms. On March 23, the MoIDPLHSA determined terms (14 day) and conditions of self-isolation/quarantine.

Contact tracing

In the matter of a new Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) infection (COVID-19) outbreak, contact tracing is an essential precondition to suspend the spread of the disease.

Epidemiological investigation group under the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health and the municipal Public Health Centers conduct on a regular basis contact tracing by compiling a "history of contact map" of the patient within 24 hours after the diagnosis of COVID-19 in order to identify people in contact with the confirmed case.

Contacts with symptoms of Coronavirus, considered to be possible cases, are taken to a medical facility, where Coronavirus is diagnosed. Contacts without a symptom are given two options: to be placed in self-isolation at home (if the rules required for isolation are observed) or to be transferred to a quarantine facility by the LEPL Emergency Coordination and Urgent Assistance Center. Relevant units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia ensure enforcement of the decision to isolate the person.

Mobilization and training of health care workers

The main challenge for the healthcare system from the first days of the response to COVID-19 outbreak was mobilization of the relevant number of medical personnel with appropriate qualification. Despite the high rates of hospital beds and artificial ventilators in relation to the population, the low number of resuscitators and infectious disease specialists employed in hospitals was noteworthy. Today, 488 resuscitators and 256 infectious disease specialists employed at all hospitals are able to serve only 1,200 critical and 853 infectious patients a day.

In order to minimize the number of cases of infection among medical staff, the MoIDPLHSA together with the managers of COVID-19 and Fever Clinics, has introduced 2-week staff rotation scheme. The medical institutions involved in the Covid-19 program created the conditions for proper rest of the staff during the 2-week shifts.

The MoIDPLHSA mobilized 405 doctors and nurses to monitor ongoing medical care in quarantine areas. The medical team at the hotel is equipped with first aid kits and medications, including pulse oximeters, which allows prompt evaluation of the severity of health condition.

By the inviation of the 25 Primary Health Care facilities, fifth and sixth year students of the medical faculties were involved in the management of the online counseling model. The process of mobilizing and training of students will continue during the preparation period for the second wave.

Infection prevention and control in healthcare settings is of critical importance. From February 2020, on-site/online trainings (the rule of using PPE and further monitoring) for health care personnel in hospital and primary health care settings are conducted across the country on regular basis with support of the World Health Organization, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, USAID, the Czech Caritas, the Open Society Georgia Foundation, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Around 2000 staff members of all the COVID and Fever clinics involved in the program have

undergone infection control trainings. 75% of rural physicians (974 rural physicians) and 90% of urban physicians, in total 2,500 were trained in early diagnosis and infection control of COVID-19. With the support of the Open Society Georgia Foundation, the medical staff of 29 COVID clinics was trained in critical case management.

Application – STOP COVID - for contact tracing of infected patients

An application developed by the Austrian non-governmental organization NOVID-20 and the Austrian company Dolphin Technologies, as an important tool for COVID-19 infected patients' contact tracing and prevention of the spread of the virus, is available in Georgia from April 16, 2020. The app allows users to find out if they have been in contact with a person infected with COVID-19. With support of this application 10 infected patients have been revived.

The app is available for iOS and Android users. STOP COVID can be downloaded for Android users - <https://bit.ly/3bkYphX> and iOS users from - <https://apple.co/2V92MXw> the links.

Communication campaign related to COVID-19

Informational and educational materials were prepared, published and disseminated, including for ethnic minorities in Armenian and Azerbaijani languages; evidence-based educational materials from CDC, WHO and other international sources are being translated and adapted continuously. Visual materials, educational posts, infographics, video materials were developed and disseminated through the social network.

Elaboration of risk communication and community engagement strategies in partnership with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO), and various government agencies is underway.

Hotline in the management of COVID-19

Proper management of hotline calls has significantly contributed to avoiding non-purposeful referral of patients to medical facilities. At the initial stage of the pandemic, under the conditions of informational shortage and panic, the majority of the population's calls were being directed exactly to 116 001 (Hotline of the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health) and 1505 (Hotline of the Ministry of IDPs from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia).

Public confidence in the hotlines during this period was quite high, to which also contributed the launch of so-called feedback principle – reverse communication to callers and provision of further detailed responses to asked questions regarding numerous issues.

Continuity of services

In order to ensure continuity of medical services, recommendations have been developed and issued for mental health centers, reproductive and perinatal care providers, dental clinics and other planned outpatient service providers to tighten infection control.

Beneficiaries of specific medication programs (including insulin-dependent individuals), as well as those over 70 who benefited from the state program for the treatment of chronic diseases were provided with the necessary medication (including insulin) at home.

To get antenatal services, pregnancy registration was done remotely.

Beneficiaries registered in mental health facilities in Tbilisi and the regions, especially in Kvemo Kartli region, were provided with the necessary medicines in accordance with their needs and requirements.

Due to the suspension of public transport in Tbilisi, transportation of beneficiaries of hemodialysis program from home to the medical facility and back was provided by the LEPL Social Service Agency completely free of charge.

For the beneficiaries of the Hepatitis C Elimination Program, who were unable to visit and receive medicines in their medical facilities due to the emergency situation and the restriction of intercity transportation, the provision of services as temporary measures was carried out remotely by using the Georgian Post service.

Financial support for the management of COVID-19

Before 1st of May, 2020 financing of diagnostics and management of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) infection (COVID-19) as well as quarantine services were covered under the state program, with total budget of GEL 89,900.0 thousand. The program also envisaged procurement of personal protective equipment, medical supplies, test systems, laboratory equipment.

In parallel with procuring PPE, medical and laboratory equipment from local vendors, MoIDPLHSA with support of the Embassy of Georgia in the People's Republic of China purchased and delivered by charter flight 52 tons of personal protective equipment and 40 000 PCR test systems from China on April 29.

From 1st of May, within the World Bank and Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank Loan Agreement, implementation of Georgia Emergency COVID-19 Response Project is underway. The overall objective of the project is to prevent, detect, and respond to the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and strengthen national systems for public health preparedness in Georgia.

The total budget of the project is 180 mln USD, which will be directed for the expansion of COVID-19 diagnostic testing, case management, procurement of PPE, medical and laboratory equipment for some state-owned hospitals. The project will also cover medical and social assistance costs related to COVID-19. Work with other donors with the purpose to attract additional investment in preparation for the next wave is ongoing.

Social protection

A number of measures have been taken in the direction of social protection to prevent the spread of the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. In particular, the issuance of state pensions, compensation, social package and other benefits continuously extended for the relevant target groups.

The documents confirming the disability status have retained legal force. Continuously extended the subsistence allowance provided to the vulnerable families - the administration of the LEPL Social Services Agency did not take any measures to terminate the assistance.

Due to the fact that the elderly and people with disabilities are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19, by the LEPL State Fund for Protection and Assistance of (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking, which is the central body of guardianship in the country was instantly restricted entrances of outside persons in 24-hour facilities in order to minimize the risks of infection. Beneficiaries were prohibited from walking in public places as much as possible and left the living area only in case of necessity; All 24-hour services carry out disinfection works and all recommendations, which are determined by the MoIDPLHSA. A special quarantine space has been set up against the spread of COVID-19, the state-funded beneficiaries who have been out of service and whose contacts are unknown are staying there and after only 14 days of quarantine, they are transferred to the appropriate 24-hour facility.

Supportive measures were also implemented within the framework of the Social Rehabilitation and Child Care State Program in terms of social services. In particular, funding continued to organizations providing services under various sub-programs (sub-programs for early childhood development, child rehabilitation/habilitation, day care centers, etc.); food vouchers were issued to day care beneficiaries to maintain social services.

In addition, with the support of the United Nations Children's Fund and the McLean Association under various sub-programs, distance services have been introduced for beneficiaries and their families to maintain social services.

Foreign governments/donor organizations support

In parallel with preventing the spread of the virus, the Georgian government is working intensively with international partners to mobilize financial support and minimize the effects of the crisis. The Donor Coordination Unit of the Government Administration now coordinates redirecting of the external aid to the COVID-19 needs, which envisages sector-based support (PPE, PCR test systems, technical assistance, expert consulting, trainings of health personnel etc.) from foreign governments and donor organizations.

The Ministry of IDPs from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia expresses special gratitude to all local and international partners, financial institutions, foreign governments and diplomatic missions (including governments of the United States, Germany, China, Japan, Korea, Estonia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Sweden, Great Britain, France, Turkey; European Union, World Bank, AIIB, ADB, KFW, GIZ, AFD, USAID, CDC, DTRA, WRAIR, DOD, ODC, INL, IAEA, UNDP, WHO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM, ILO, Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, Czech Development Agency, SIDA, Georgia Red Cross Society, Czech Caritas, Open Society Georgia Foundation, Curatio International Foundation) for their efforts and support rendered to the Ministry to efficiently respond to COVID-19 pandemic.

Anti-Crisis Plan of the Government

Financial Assistance

From the beginning of the pandemic, the decisions taken by the Georgian Government considered necessary steps to prevent the spread of the virus as well as to reduce the negative impact of the epidemic on the citizens, socially vulnerable families, people with severe disabilities and children with disabilities.

The Anti-Crisis Plan envisages direct financial assistance to various categories of citizens. such as employees, self-employed and various vulnerable groups. In particular:

- Employees who have lost their jobs or been on unpaid leave will receive 200 GEL per month during 6 months. About 350,000 citizens will be able to benefit from the assistance. The budget of the program is up to 460 million GEL. 90 775 employees were already compensated.
- Self-employed individuals of different categories will receive a one-off assistance equal to 300 GEL. The information provided by the citizen will be used to identify and prove that the citizen had income before the epidemic. The total budget of the program is 75 million GEL. 80 081 self-employed individuals were already compensated.
- During 6 months additional, average 600 GEL assistance is designated to:
 - Socially vulnerable families whose social rating score is from 65,000 to 100,000. It is noteworthy that today these families receive social assistance only for children less than 16 years of age. The number of beneficiaries of the program is more than 190 thousand individuals (70 000 families), and the budget is 45 million Gel. Up to 70,000 families were already compensated in May.
 - Socially vulnerable families whose social rating score is 0 to 100 001 and who have 3 or more children aged 16 and below will receive 600 GEL over a 6 month period. The number of beneficiaries of the program is 130 000 individuals, and the budget is 13 million GEL. Up to 22,000 families were already compensated in May.
 - Persons with severe disabilities and disabled children will receive assistance a total of 600 GEL in 6 months. The number of beneficiaries is 40000 individuals in total, and the budget amounts to 25 million Gel. More than 40,000 beneficiaries (including pensioners with severe disabilities) were compensated so far.
- In addition to the above, additional growth of pension for pensioners aged 70 and older by 30 GEL from 1st July will remain in force. More than 410 000 pensioners will benefit from above said.

Apart from that, pension indexation will be introduced from January 2021, in particular:

- The pension of all pensioners will increase by no less than the rate of inflation i.e. rising prices will no longer affect the real volume of the real pension.
- For retirees aged 70 and over, 80% of real economic growth will be added to inflation, or the annual pension increase will be higher than inflation.
- 80 % of real economic growth will be added to the rate of inflation for pensioners aged 70 and older, i.e. the annual rate of growth of pensions will be higher than the rate of inflation.
- Pension growth will be no less than 20 GEL – and no less than 25 GEL for pensioners aged 70 and older – regardless of inflation and economic growth parameters.

- Once the epidemic has ended, the social assistance system (granting scores and the amount of financial assistance) will be revised.

Resumption of economic activities for business sector

Due to the nationwide state of emergency, restrictions were imposed on economic activities as well. In order to safely, swiftly and sustainably renew the economic activities, on March 24, 2020 the general and around 30 detailed sectorial recommendations on the prevention of the spread of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) at workplace have been elaborated and are still being developing, based on the economic needs.

In parallel with the dissemination of information, the companies, with an intention to renew economic activities have been inspected in advance, in total 12 040. The inspection process from 27th of April is managed and coordinated by the Labour Conditions Inspections Department of the Ministry with support of the specially created electronic platform. Apart from the Labour Conditions Inspection Department the following governmental entities are involved in the process of monitoring economic activities: Municipal services, LEPL Social Service Agency, Department of Environmental Supervision, LEPL National Food Agency, LEPL Revenue Service, LEPL Technical and Construction Supervision Agency, LEPL Regulation Agency for Medical and Pharmaceutical Activities.

From 13th of June planned inspection is being conducted regularly. Due to the violation of the norms on the prevention of the spread of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) at workplace 26 business entities were fined with amount of 160 000 GEL in total.