



Migration Profile

TURKMENISTAN

A. Executive Summary

Turkmenistan is a presidential republic located in Central Asia with a population of 5,942,089 inhabitants (2019). The country is divided into five provinces (Ahal, Balkan, Dashoguz, Lebap, Mary) and an autonomous city district (the capital Ashgabat). It borders Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and the Caspian Sea. The total surface area is 491,210 sq km and the country has an arid continental climate with extreme ranges in temperature and low rainfall. The desert plain of Karakum covers 80% of the country's land-mass making Turkmenistan one of the most inhospitable terrains in Central Asia with few areas suitable for human habitation. Its population density (10.6/sq km) is among the lowest in Central Asia. The country is regularly affected by natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, hot winds and sandstorms, which have a devastating effect on the livelihoods of vulnerable people.

Turkmenistan is the second largest economic power in Central Asia after Kazakhstan, due to its rich natural gas, oil fields and cotton crops. A major element of the country's rural economy is carpet manufacturing, which is considered mainly as women's work.

A member of the UN and the OSCE, the Republic of Turkmenistan has been an independent country since 1992 and for the first time in history, a UN resolution granted the country permanent neutrality status in 1995.

The official language is Turkmen and is the sole language of 72% of the population, followed by Russian, which is considered as the second unofficial language of the country. The country's Constitution recognises Russian as the language for communication among different ethnic groups.

Situated geographically between Asia and Europe, Turkmenistan is both a transit and a destination point for people from neighbouring countries. Statistics show that the number of refugees and asylum seekers from Turkmenistan has steadily increased, doubling in the last ten years. In 2000, there were 323 refugees and asylum seekers; in 2010, this increased to 804, rising to 1,680 in 2018. The number of asylum seekers and refugees in Turkmenistan decreased between 2010 and 2019. Specifically, in 2016 there were 27, comprised of 19 Afghans, 7 Azeris and 1 Russian. In 2017 there were 23, including 14 Afghans, 8 Azeris and 1 Russian; and in 2018 there were 21, including 14 Afghans and 7 Azeris. According to the latest UNHCR estimates, 22 refugees

were registered in 2019, while one was naturalised. There are substantially fewer refugees than in neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan (72,227), Iran (979,435), Kazakhstan (518) and Uzbekistan (13). In 2019, emigration from Turkmenistan had reached a total of 195,000 people.

In 1997, Turkmenistan adopted the Refugee Law (last amended in 2017) which determines the procedure for granting refugee status, protection provisions, the legal status of persons granted refugee status, legal and economic standards and social guarantees for the protection of the rights of persons granted refugee status. Subsequently, in 1998, the country acceded to the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 New York Protocol. In December 2019, a new National Action Plan for 2020-2022 on combating trafficking in human beings was adopted.

B. Country Profile

I. Basic information

Turkmenistan is a presidential republic located in Central Asia with a population of 5,942,089 inhabitants (2019). It is a member of the UN and OSCE. The country is one of the republics born after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Its Parliament (Medjlis) is the highest representative body, exercising legislative power. Turkmenistan is the second largest state in Central Asia, and is divided into five provinces (Ahal, Balkan, Dashoguz, Lebap, Mary) and an autonomous city located in the capital Ashgabat, which is the political and economic centre of the country and situated close to the Iranian border. Two other important cities are Türkmenabat and Dashoguz. The country also borders Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and the Caspian Sea. Due to its rich deposits of natural gas and oil as well as cotton crops, it is the second largest economic power in Central Asia behind Kazakhstan. The total area is 491,210 sq km, with an arid continental climate with extreme ranges of temperature and low rainfall. As the desert plain of Karakum covers 80% of its land area, Turkmenistan has one of the most inhospitable terrains in Central Asia with few areas suitable for human habitation. The population density of 10.6/sq km is among the lowest in Central Asia. The only major river in the country is the Amu Darya, which is extensively and excessively exploited for the production of cotton, while the other sources of water coming from Iran and Afghanistan run completely dry once they are channelled into the Karakum Desert. The country is also regularly affected by several natural disasters: earthquakes, floods, salinity, hot winds and sandstorms that have a devastating effect on the livelihoods of vulnerable people.

Turkmenistan has a GDP of US\$7,411 per capita (2018) and an unemployment rate of 60% of the population, with 58% of the population living below the poverty line. Life expectancy is 65 for men and 71 for women.

Turkmenistan is an independent country which was granted permanent neutrality status by the United Nations in 1995, the first time in history for a member state. In line with this policy, Turkmenistan has engaged in constructive dialogue with all its neighbours and at the same time has adopted a policy of non-interference in the affairs of other countries. It also has a visa system for both leaving and entering the country.

The official language is Turkmen and is the sole language of 72% of the inhabitants, while Russian is recognised in the Constitution as the language for communication among different ethnic groups and is considered the second, although unofficial, language after Turkmen. Between 1938

and 1991 the Cyrillic alphabet was used and since 1991 the Latin alphabet has been used, though with some modifications.

Most inhabitants (90%) are Turkmen, and the remaining 10% includes Uzbeks, Russians, Kazakhs, Azeris, Persians, Armenians and Tatars. The Turkmen are an Asian ethnic group mainly based in Turkmenistan and to a lesser extent in Turkey, northern Syria, Kurdistan, northeastern Iran and Afghanistan. The predominant religion is Islam, mostly Sunnis (90%), and about 9% Orthodox Christians. There is also a very small community of Catholics, amounting to about 250 people throughout the country.

II. International and Internal Migration

Whereas in other Central Asian countries Russia plays a fundamental role as a destination country for labour migration, in Turkmenistan, Turkey is the most popular destination. This is due to the linguistic affinity between these two countries as their languages belong to the same linguistic group. The next most popular destinations are Iran and the Persian Gulf countries, such as the Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, in light of their geographic location.

Labour migration is the result of a prolonged economic crisis that has forced people to leave the country in search of work elsewhere. Many of the Turkmen who migrate for work go to Turkey, with which Turkmenistan has a visa-free entry agreement. Turkey receives an average of 20,000 to 25,000 Turkmen workers per year. Of the almost 500,000 Turkmen who work there, only a few hundred have applied for political asylum.

III. Emigration and skilled migration

According to the data collected, the total number of emigrants from Turkmenistan was 195,000 people in 2019. The Statistical Committee of Turkmenistan also report that between 2008 and 2018, almost 2 million people left the country for residence or permanent work abroad. These figures confirm that the country is suffering the consequences of limited economic and employment opportunities, as well as a lack of personal freedom. According to other statistics, the number of refugees from Turkmenistan, which has an entry and exit visa system, has doubled in the last decade. While the number of refugees and asylum seekers from Turkmenistan was 323 in 2000, this number increased to 804 in 2010 and to 1,680 in 2018.

According to the latest estimates, there are between 15,000 and 20,000 Kazakh people living in Turkmenistan, comprising about 0.4% of the population. In 2018, however, 370 ethnic Kazakhs left the country, most of them young and middle-aged. For this reason, in recent years there have been several attempts by the authorities to try to slow down the flow of people leaving the country.

Tens of thousands of young people emigrate to study at foreign universities in Turkey, Kazakhstan, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, India, China and Malaysia.

Emigrants from Turkmenistan go mainly to the countries of the former Soviet Union, above all the Russian Federation. After the Russian Federation, the United States and Germany are among the priority destinations for emigration.

IV. Forced Migration (internally displaced, asylum seekers and refugees)

Turkmenistan's geographical position between Asia and Europe makes the country a transit or destination point for people from neighbouring countries. In past years, most of the asylum seekers and refugees in Turkmenistan came from Tajikistan and Afghanistan. In the period between 2010 and 2019, these decreased, especially those from Afghanistan. In 2016 there were 27 refugees and asylum seekers in the country, comprised of 19 Afghans, 7 Azeris and 1 Russian. In 2017 there were 23 refugees, including 14 Afghans, 8 Azeris and 1 Russian; and in 2018 there were 21, including 14 Afghans and 7 Azeris. There are also a number of refugees and asylum seekers of other nationalities, in particular, Armenians from Azerbaijan, Azeris from Nagorno-Karabakh, Chechens, Iraqis and Iranians. Most of the refugees in Turkmenistan are Turkmen (from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan) settled in rural areas of Lebap, Mary and Akhal provinces, while non-Turkmen refugees reside mainly in urban areas such as Ashgabat and Türkmenabat. According to UNHCR estimates, in 2019 there were 22 refugees in Turkmenistan, one of whom was naturalised. Currently, asylum seekers benefit from resettlement, voluntary repatriation or local integration in substantially fewer numbers than in neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan (72,227), Iran (979,435), Tajikistan (3,791) and Kazakhstan (524). It is difficult, however, to find data on internally displaced persons in the country.

Although Turkmenistan formally provides protection for refugees and asylum seekers, the system is inactive. Central Asian countries welcome visitors and tourists, but have not yet become operational with regard to asylum seekers. Until 2014, Turkmen citizens did not appear in EU statistics for political asylum, making it more difficult to analyse this phenomenon. Indeed, Turkmenistan's isolation makes it difficult to follow trends in the country. Most Turkmen asylum seekers within the European Union (96%) were registered in Germany, with an increase in 2014-2015. Since then, very few asylum applications have been recorded, due to a further tightening of the travel ban on Turkmen citizens of working age (up to 40 years). Among other Central Asian states, Turkmen over the age of 18 have been the predominant group of asylum seekers for many years. The inability of Turkmen citizens to leave their country characterises the country's experience of migration as a whole. It should be noted that the number of refugees from Turkmenistan has doubled in the last decade. While the number of refugees and asylum seekers from the country in 2000 was 323, this number increased to 804 in 2010, and to 1,680 in 2018.

V. Victims of Human Trafficking

Turkmenistan adopted the Anti-Trafficking Act in 2016 (with the latest amendments in 2018). As reported in the US Department of State's "Trafficking in Persons Report 2020", the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking in persons are not yet fully satisfied. Article 129/1 of the Turkmen Penal Code criminalises trafficking in persons and labour, prescribing penalties of imprisonment from 4 to 10 years for crimes involving adult trafficked persons and from 8 to 15 years for crimes involving child victims of trafficking. According to the report, traffickers exploit victims both in Turkmenistan and beyond. Labour exploitation is the dominant problem of human trafficking, followed by sexual exploitation abroad, to which women in Turkmenistan are also subjected. Among the main destinations of victims of trafficking, Turkey, Russia and India are the most frequent, followed by countries in the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe.

According to the "Trafficking in Persons Report 2020", international organisations reported that in 2018 they assisted 25 victims (including 12 women and 13 men). The actual number of victims is thought to be significantly higher, as evidenced by the 6,998 calls to the foreign-funded Trafficking in Persons hotlines in Ashgabat and Türkmenabat in the same year. Twice as many calls were

received in 2017, and most of these calls concerned requests for safe migration, while seven calls were related to human trafficking. In 2017, the hotline was suspended for lack of funding but reopened in 2018. In the same year, an NGO provided support to a shelter for trafficked women with funding from foreign donors. The shelter provided services to seven trafficked women, including local reintegration and job placement. The Anti-Trafficking Act prescribes free legal support to trafficked women, but the legal aid system is currently inactive.

VI. National Legal Framework

Turkmenistan adopted the Refugee Law in 1997 (last amended in 2017) which determines the procedure for granting refugee status, protection provisions, the legal status of persons granted refugee status, and establishes legal and economic standards and social guarantees for the protection of the rights of persons granted refugee status in Turkmenistan. Subsequently, in 1998, the country joined the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 New York Protocol. The national legal framework is as follows:

- The Refugee Law of 1997 (last amended in 2017)
- The 2012 Migration Act (last amended in 2020)
- The Legal Status of Foreigners Act of 2011
- The Citizenship Act of 2013 (latest amendments of 2018).

The country has also ratified two key international legal instruments on statelessness: the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. In January 2019, the Government adopted the National Action Plan for the Elimination of Statelessness 2018-2024 to provide adequate safeguards to prevent statelessness, including the establishment of procedures to determine the status of stateless persons. UNHCR is providing technical assistance for the proper implementation of the National Action Plan for the Elimination of Statelessness 2018-2024 and has initiated a dialogue with the relevant authorities to determine the actual and effective number of stateless persons in the country for the next national census in 2022.

In July 2020, a new law on civil status registers came into force, which helps to ensure the registration of the births of all children born in the country. The law thus helps to prevent the emergence of new cases of statelessness among children born to parents without regular documents or whose nationality is not defined. This new legislation represents a series of significant advances made by Turkmenistan to prevent and reduce statelessness in the country. During the past 15 years, Turkmen citizenship has been granted to some 23,000 refugees and stateless persons. This figure includes some 10,000 stateless persons who have acquired citizenship through naturalisation since the country acceded to the 1954 Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons in 2011.

As of December 2019, UNHCR estimates that the total number of stateless persons residing in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan amounted to 116,629 persons in Central Asia. It is assumed that the number of stateless persons is higher, however, given the continued incidence of statelessness in Turkmenistan. The majority of these people are former citizens of the Soviet Union who have so far either not obtained citizenship or have not confirmed

their membership of new independent states that appeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Others have remained stateless, due to gaps in national laws on citizenship, international migration and mixed marriages. For example, as of 2015, Turkmen law does not allow dual nationality: all citizens with dual nationality (most of whom have Turkmen-Russian nationality) are obliged to renounce one of the two if they wish to travel outside the country. The process of renouncing Turkmen citizenship is not easy and takes quite a long time.

VII. Main Actors

The State

In December 2019, with the help of the IOM, the government adopted the new National Action Plan for 2020-2022 on Fighting Human Trafficking and launched the National Referral Mechanism 2019-2021 focusing on identification and assistance to trafficked persons. The National Referral Mechanism 2019-2021 includes the prevention of trafficking through national information campaigns, targeting migrant youth in particular, the protection of victims of trafficking and vulnerable migrants, working through the NGO network and strengthening the capacities of law enforcement and judiciary in the prosecution of trafficking-related crimes and, finally, the creation of partnerships for successful cooperation. Finally, the IOM continues to support hotlines and shelters in the fight against trafficking in persons within the country.

The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church has been officially present in Turkmenistan since 1997 with the establishment of the *Missio sui iuris* of the Holy See operating in the whole territory. Instituted by Pope John Paul II with its seat in the capital of Ashgabat, the Mission was entrusted to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate who, in addition to liturgical service, provide reception services and aid to poor and needy families. In 2010, the Turkmen government officially recognised the Catholic presence in the country. Before that, from 1997 to 2010, the Oblates were recognized as collaborators of the Pontifical Nunciature in Turkmenistan. There are no other Catholic missions, congregations or organisations in the territory.

International Organisations

The IOM and UNHCR are actively working in the country. In 1998, the Turkmen government and UNHCR signed a Cooperation Agreement under which the international organisation can pursue its main objective of protecting the rights of refugees and asylum seekers and helping refugees to find lasting solutions in the country. As reported by IOM in September 2020, government-backed UN agencies in Turkmenistan launched the United Nations Migration Network in Turkmenistan, which will facilitate more effective, timely and coordinated action at the level of the UN system to support the Turkmen government in implementing the Global Compact for Migration in line with its national priorities. At the global level, the IOM will act as coordinator and secretariat, enabling the IOM, the UN system, the government and other partners to work together to ensure that migration is a positive factor for the development of both Turkmenistan and the region as a whole. The United Nations Migration Network in Turkmenistan will focus on promoting a greater understanding of migration dynamics by improving information and coordination of migration issues within the UN system, and with the Government of Turkmenistan and other stakeholders. It will also work closely with international and non-governmental organisations and other entities to assist in the implementation of the Global Compact for Migration as well as migration policies and

approaches to support the well-being of migrants and societies in accordance with national legislation.

Other organisations

The NGO "Yenme" was established in Ashgabat in 2012 and is active throughout the country. With the support of IOM, it implements projects for rehabilitation centres for victims of trafficking, using a creative approach to social reintegration and legal, medical, psychological and professional assistance. In addition, the organisation conducts information campaigns on the fight against trafficking and raises public awareness for an integrated approach to protecting the health of migrants.

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