

PHOTO OF THE DAY



UPCOMING EVENTS

Budapest municipal assembly meets

Govt official on new foster parent scheme

Opposition demonstration in front of Chief Public Prosecutor's Office

AGROmashEXPO opens

TOP STORY

ORBÁN MEETS WITH APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO SYRIA

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán met in his office Archbishop Mario Zenari, the Apostolic Nuncio to Syria, and handed him a document on the Hungarian government's humanitarian aid efforts in Syria, the PM's press chief said.

The prime minister stressed Hungary's commitment to helping communities and families in need in the Middle East and relieving the humanitarian disaster there. He noted his government's position that help should be provided at the point where it is needed rather than "bringing trouble over to Europe". As a sign of its solidarity, the Hungarian government has donated 505 million forints (EUR 1.6m) in aid to the Italian AVSI Foundation with a view to funding the operation of Aleppo's St. Louis Hospital and the French Hospital and Italian Hospital in Damascus for a year.

Zenari noted at the meeting that minorities, especially Christian women and children, are the biggest victims of the armed conflict in Syria. He said the local hospitals operated by Christian churches also treat Muslims. The meeting was also attended by Miklós Kásler, the human resources minister, Tristan Azbej, the state secretary for aiding persecuted Christians, Michael August Blume, the Apostolic Nuncio to Budapest, and Giampaolo Silvestri, secretary-general of the AVSI Foundation.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: EUROPE'S SECURITY STARTS WITH AFRICA

The security of Europe currently starts with Africa as global challenges affect both continents at the same time, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said, after a meeting of African Union foreign ministers in Brussels. Everyone who addressed Tuesday's meeting discussed migration in addition to economic cooperation, Szijjártó told a press conference. Cooperation on migration should not lead to more people being encouraged to leave Africa, he said. Rather, efforts should be made to improve living conditions there so that people are not forced to leave, he added.

It is necessary to clearly define different types and goals of cooperation, and learning from the debates about the United Nations' Global Compact for Migration, it is necessary to establish that migration is not a basic human right, he said. Migration has "very serious security risks" not only on the target countries but also on origin countries and transit countries, he said. Every state has the right to avoid belonging in any of these categories, he added. Europe must help establish and strengthen economic, political, legal and security stability in African countries, Szijjártó said.

He added that he was visiting Tunisia on Wednesday because local authorities there had requested Hungary to provide support for the strengthening of border protection capabilities. The Hungarian government believes that stability in Northern African countries is a number one precondition for them to be able to protect their borders, he added. He also said that it is important to help young people in Africa receive competitive skills, noting that 1,422 African students were studying in Hungary, including 895 who had received scholarships. Under the arrangements of the Hungary Helps programme, Hungary currently supports the improvement of living conditions for Christian refugees in Nigeria, as well as in Congo, Ethiopia and Uganda, he said. Szijjártó on Monday held bilateral meetings with the foreign ministers of Botswana and Sierra Leone and met diplomatic leaders of Mali and Ghana on Tuesday.

ORBÁN HAS TALKS WITH POMPEO

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo discussed by phone topical economic and political issues concerning Hungary-US relations, the PM's press chief said. In their conversation, Orbán and Pompeo both expressed their intent to meet in person in the near future, Bertalan Havasi told MTI.

SOCIALISTS URGE LOWERING VAT ON CULTURAL SERVICES

The opposition Socialist Party has proposed that VAT on services in areas of culture such as theatre, musical events and museums, should be lowered from 27% to 5%. István Hiller, a deputy house speaker, said that the proposal was triggered by "uncertainties" in financing for culture after the government removed the earlier subsidy system in which companies could offer a part of their corporate tax for cultural purposes. Concerning the previous system commonly referred to as "TAO", Hiller said: "It was not the magnitude of the sum [lost central budget revenue] that the government was concerned about but the fact that taxpayers could decide themselves which cultural institutions to support". "The culture subsidy system was quickly removed but we only have rumours about what will replace it," he said. He objected to plans to set up a government committee for distributing a total of 32-35 billion forints (EUR 100m-110m) for cultural purposes each year.

Hiller argued that lowering the VAT in question would not add up to more than budget losses due to the TAO system's removal, and insisted that such a move would be "predictable, calculable, positive for all parties and it would increase the country's competitiveness." Hiller said he maintained his earlier proposal to raise salaries in culture above inflation.

RUBBER UNION DEMONSTRATIONS BACKED BY MI HAZÁNK YIELD AGREEMENTS

The demonstrations held against new labour rules by the union of rubber industry workers with the backing of the Mi Hazánk (Our Homeland) party have yielded agreements, István Apáti, an independent lawmaker of the radical nationalist party, said.

The union and Mi Hazánk staged demonstrations mounting partial road blocks at the facilities of foreign-owned rubber companies in Budapest and seven other cities during the day. The party said last week that the protests would be held at the plants of Continental, Michelin and Hankook against low wages, the recently adopted labour code amendment on overtime rules and poor working conditions. Speaking at a press conference, Apáti hailed agreements the union reached with employers at the Nyíregyháza and Veszprém plants on not implementing new rules that raise the upper threshold for annual overtime from 250 to 400 hours. He said Mi Hazánk would continue to support actions of protest in this "reasonable form" in the future.

HUNGARY GROSS WAGES UP 10.4% YR/YR IN NOV

Gross wage growth in Hungary grew by an annual 10.4% in November, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. In

absolute terms, Hungarians employed full time earned a gross monthly 355,100 forints (EUR 1,118). Net wages also grew by 10.4%, to 236,100 forints during the period. Twelve-month wage growth has been in the double digits since early 2017, after an agreement was reached by employers, unions and the government on big minimum wage increases paired with payroll tax cuts. The finance ministry's state secretary for employment, Sándor Bodó, said the government endeavours to ensure the wage increases, which have lasted 71 months so far, will continue this year.

In 2018, employees pocketed an extra month's salary, he said, noting a marked wage increase for manual workers and a higher rate of wage hikes in the country's less advanced regions. The government expects an average rise of above 6% in real wages this year, he added.

Analysts told MTI that robust wage growth would endure this year, though at a slightly lower rate than last year. Péter Virovác of ING Bank said wage growth was in line with market expectations, but a downward trend was detectable. András Horváth of Takarékbank forecast wage growth rate exceeding 11% in 2018 and 9% this year. Last year, growth in real wages was 8.3%, and in 2019 the analyst expects a 6% increase, he said. Orsolya Nyeste of Erste Bank said no single factor pointed to a major slowdown in 2019 and wage growth was likely to be 7-8%. Dávid Németh of K&H Bank said that after last year's growth, average wages would continue to rise this year as the basic minimum wage and the minimum wage for skilled workers was still rising and labour market conditions would continue to stimulate wage growth.

BUDGET DEFICIT 106% FY TARGET BY YEAR-END

Hungary's cash flow-based budget, excluding local councils, ran a 1,445.1 billion forint (EUR 4.5bn) deficit at the end of December, hitting 106.2% of the 1,360.7 billion full-year target, the Finance Ministry confirmed in a second reading of data. A lag between payouts by the Hungarian government to EU funding recipients and EU transfers had lifted the general deficit over 135% of the full-year target by November, but some 890 billion from Brussels that arrived in December narrowed the gap.

Hungary's government has been pre-financing European Union-supported projects to avoid a snarl-up at the end of the 2014-2020 funding cycle. The full-year deficit, calculated using EU accrual-based accounting rules, is expected at around 2% of GDP, better than the original 2.4% target, while the ratio of gross public debt to GDP could have fallen further, to 71%, the ministry said. Final EU-conform numbers will be available in March at the earliest.

HUNGARIANS HAVE HIGH OPINION OF GERMANY

Hungarians have a high opinion of Germany and they strongly support boosting Hungarian-German relations, analysts said at a conference focusing on perceptions of Germany in Hungary. Citing an October 2018 survey, Dániel Nagy, chief researcher

at the Nézőpont Research Institute, said that 54% of respondents tended to view Germany favourably while 32% tended to hold a negative view. The proportion of Hungarians who viewed bilateral ties as good went up to 62% last year from 56% in 2017, Nagy noted, citing a phone survey by Nézőpont.

The opinion of Hungarians particularly improved concerning economic relations, with the proportion of respondents expressing a favourable view going up to 69% from 62%, he said. Commenting on the issue of migration, Zoltán Balog, the head of the Foundation for Civic Hungary who is the former minister of human resources, said the issue was greeted with much greater sensitivity in central European countries, which had been unable to exercise their sovereignty for a long time, than in countries that had no experience of communism.

OFFICIAL: KŐRÖSI CSOMA SCHEME CONTRIBUTES TO CEMENTING TIES WITH DIASPORA HUNGARIANS

The government's Kőrösi Csoma Sándor Programme has greatly contributed to strengthening ties between Hungary and Hungarian communities worldwide, the ministerial commissioner in charge of the scheme said. Péter Szilágyi spoke at a welcoming ceremony for volunteers of the programme returning from South America, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa after a period of 7 months. Szilágyi told the gathering that ties with communities far from the Carpathian Basin had been "much less strong" before 2010 than now, thanks to the efforts of the programme's participants. The scheme is aimed at helping ethnic communities retain their national identity and strengthen cohesion through Hungarian language teaching and cultural activities.

NBH FUNDS GIANT INTERACTIVE LCD DISPLAY FOR MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Budapest's Museum of Fine Arts unveiled a 15-metre-wide, interactive LCD display purchased with 150 million forints (EUR 471,500) in funding from the National Bank of Hungary (NBH). Visitors to the museum can see pieces from the collection on the screen that are otherwise difficult to view, said NBH deputy-governor Ferenc Gerhardt. Some 300 paintings, sculptures and other works of art are being showcased on the LCD display, said museum director László Baán. Baán said more than 100,000 people had visited the museum since it reopened on October 31, following a 15 billion forint three-year renovation.