

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTVA/Attila Kovács

The youngest meerkat (*Suricata suricatta*) of Budapest Zoo

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

EU foreign, justice, interior ministers meet in Brussels

Stats office second estimate on industry in Jan 2020

TOP STORY

GOVT ORDERS STATE OF EMERGENCY FOR CORONAVIRUS

The government has ordered a state of emergency in connection with protective measures against the new coronavirus, Gergely Gulyás, the head of the Prime Minister's Office, told a press conference.

Gulyás said the government had made its decision in line with a proposal by the interior minister and the operative board. The government has ordered a ban on travellers from Italy, China, South Korea and Iran, except for Hungarian citizens returning from those locations who will have to stay in isolation at home for two weeks after their arrival, the minister added. In order to enforce the new travel restrictions, border controls will be reintroduced on Hungary's Schengen borders with Slovenia and Austria. All trains, buses and flights from the countries in question will be subjected to general border control measures. Full border control rules are planned to be introduced also on the Hungary-Croatia border by midnight on Wednesday, Gulyás added.

The government has also decided to ban indoor events with more than 100 people attending, while outdoor events with more than 500 participants will also be subject to the ban, Gulyás said. It will be the organisers' responsibility to cancel the events, he added.

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GOVT ORDERS BAN ON UNIVERSITY VISITS, SCHOOLS REMAIN OPEN

The government has introduced a ban on university visits but remote study options will remain open as a protective measure in the fight against the coronavirus, Gergely Gulyás, the head of the Prime Minister's Office, said. Universities will start closing down on Thursday, he added. Gulyás noted that Hungarian universities have a high number of foreign students, adding that out of Hungary's 13 coronavirus cases so far 9 were foreign nationals. He said schools will remain open for the time being but this may change if it becomes necessary for protection of life and health. He argued that the virus was not typically affecting children, and closing primary schools could involve having to repeat the whole school-year. Any documents that are to expire in the near future will remain valid during the state of emergency, he added. All measures will remain valid until further notice, he said.

The measures which Gulyás said were unprecedented since Hungary's transition to democracy 30 years ago would give the most comprehensive authorisation for protection to state bodies. He added that the constitution included clear rules for the state of emergency and the disaster management law specified detailed regulations.

The government has also decided to suspend the Határtalanul! (With

no borders) school trip programme, and will also postpone by one year language courses planned for the summer holidays. Gulyás said that people spreading rumours or violating quarantine rules would be prosecuted. Making false statements regarding travel will be sanctioned, he said, adding that the information could be checked from mobile phones location data.

Gulyás said priority will be given to protection of life and health, to be followed by prevention of economic losses. The epidemic will certainly have considerable economic consequences and the majority of countries are now fighting to avoid recession, he said. "Hungary's chances for this are among the best," he added. In response to a question regarding travel restrictions in the case of mixed Hungarian-foreign couples, he said special rules could be introduced in the future but for the time being, only Hungarian citizens are allowed to return from the countries in question.

Gulyás said that the ban on indoor events with more than 100 participants would not apply to parliament because it is regarded a constitutional body which would gather even under extraordinary situations like a war. He said in response to a question that an adequate number of coronavirus tests were available in 37 laboratories around the country. He added that various theatre and cinema screenings are likely to be cancelled but the ban on indoor events with more than 100 participants would not apply

to shopping malls. Creches and kindergartens are managed by local councils and it will remain in their authority to decide whether to close them or not, he said. Large companies with many workers are also suggested to introduce necessary measures based on in-house decisions, he said.

NUMBER OF NEW VIRUS PATIENTS IN HUNGARY GROWS TO 13

The 13th person in Hungary to be diagnosed with Covid-19 is a Hungarian woman who has been in contact with the Debrecen-based British man diagnosed earlier this month, koronavirus.gov.hu, the government website providing information on the outbreak, said. The woman has been quarantined in Budapest's St László hospital for the past few days, the website said. The authorities have started investigating whom she may have been in contact with, it said.

Among the 13 confirmed cases so far, eight are Iranian, one is British and four are Hungarian. On Wednesday morning, 53 people were in quarantine due to suspicion of carrying the new virus, while the health authority has done tests on 531 samples, according to koronavirus.gov.hu.

ORBÁN TRAVELS TO MOLDOVA

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has travelled to Moldova on an official

visit, his press chief said. Orbán is scheduled to hold talks with Ion Chicu, his Moldovan counterpart, in Chisinau, Bertalan Havasi told MTI.

The two prime ministers will sign a strategic partnership accord and they are scheduled to address a Hungarian-Moldovan business forum. Orbán will also hold talks with Moldova's president and parliamentary speaker.

PÁRBESZÉD WELCOMES EMERGENCY MEASURES, DK BLAMES GOVT FOR DELAY

The opposition Párbeszéd party has welcomed that the government declared a state of emergency with regard to the coronavirus epidemic, while the Democratic Coalition (DK) said the measures should have been introduced much earlier.

Tímea Szabó, Párbeszéd's parliamentary leader, told a press conference that introduction of a state of emergency was a good start for preparations, should the situation aggravate. Szabó, however, asked why the government had not ordered the closure of schools similarly to 15 other European Union members. She argued that while children did not typically get sick, they could pass on the virus. She called on the government to work out protocols for parents who may have to stay at home with their children in case of a possible schools ban, and suggested that such parents should receive their full salaries. Szabó also called on the government to

provide primary health care staff with protective gear and disinfectants, and insisted that health care services would collapse if too many general practitioners got sick.

On another subject, Szabó said it was not clear if the "tens of thousands" of guest workers returning from Italy and travelling across Hungary were screened for coronavirus. Referring to press reports, she said that passengers on flights from Italy in the past few days had not been subjected to any screening, and demanded that the earlier strict controls should be restored.

Csaba Molnár, DK's executive deputy leader, said that the government's declaring a state of emergency was "the result of a nervous rush" and accused the government of trying to belittle the problem for weeks. Molnár insisted that recent government reports had suggested that "there is enough health care capacity, there are enough face masks, enough respirators and all is in the best order", while the government's "giving itself the broadest powers under the constitution" on Wednesday constitute "a clear and serious contradiction".

The government is "in full panic", Molnár said, adding that "while a week or ten days ago such an announcement would have suggested a readiness to take action, now it is telling people that the government is not in control of the situation".

Conservative Jobbik leader Péter Jakab called for a "public health border seal" and demanded that foreign

nationals should only be allowed to enter the country if they had a written certificate of their non-infectious status. In a Facebook entry, Jakab said that creches, kindergartens and schools should be closed. He argued that such measures could reduce the spread of the virus by up to one thirds, and said that leaving those institutions open could jeopardise the health of both children and parents. Jakab also warned that "hundreds of thousands" of illegal migrants in Turkey could set off for Europe, with the Turkish media suggesting that they could cross the "less controlled" Romania-Hungary border. He said it was an open question how many of those migrants could be infected, adding that it was crucial that the government should reestablish the border guards. "The border should be controlled by border guards. This is an issue of public security and public health," he added.

SEMJÉN CALLS FOR MORE SERVICES TO AVOID CROWDED CHURCHES

The Hungarian state respects the freedom of the churches and will not impose any restrictions concerning religious services, Deputy PM Zsolt Semjén said after the government announced a state of emergency with regard to the spread of coronavirus, but suggested that bigger churches should hold more services than usual to facilitate an even distribution of people in enclosed spaces. As part of its new measures, the government

banned any indoor event involving more than 100 people. Semjén also suggested that religious services could be broadcast by the public media.

DOCTORS' CHAMBER CALLS ON GOVT TO PROVIDE HEALTH WORKERS WITH PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

The Hungarian Chamber of Doctors (MOK) has called on the government to equip health-care employees with protective gear. The chamber's head, Gyula Kincses, said that employees needed protection from the new coronavirus. Also, he said indebted hospitals should not have to bear the extra costs related to the epidemic, and he called on the government to cover the relevant financing. Meanwhile, Kincses said that in light of the new coronavirus epidemic, the chamber would not insist on its demand on terminating voluntary overtime if wage negotiations fail.

ORBÁN BRIEFS EU COUNTERPARTS ON HUNGARY'S RESPONSE TO NEW VIRUS

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in a conference call briefed European Union heads of state and government on the situation in Hungary regarding the new coronavirus outbreak, warning of the virus's effects on the economy and pointing out its links to migration, his press chief said. In the call initiated

by European Council President Charles Michel, Orbán told his counterparts that the Hungarian authorities had the coronavirus situation under control, noting that only individual cases had been identified in the country so far. All confirmed cases have been quarantined, he said, adding that the world must find a balance between understating the seriousness of the situation and panic, Bertalan Havasi said. The prime minister also highlighted Hungary's "excellent cooperation" with the Austrian authorities.

Orbán said there was a clear link between illegal migration and the coronavirus outbreak, arguing that a number of migrants who arrived in Europe either came from Iran or passed through it. Hungary has therefore strengthened the protection of its borders and temporarily sealed its transit zones, he said. Concerning the future, Orbán said Hungary will be working to limit the virus's effects on the economy. The government is exploring ways of providing help to Hungarian businesses affected by the virus in line with European regulations, he said.

SZIJJÁRTÓ MEETS ESTONIAN COUNTERPART IN TALLINN

Ties between Hungary and Estonia are based on mutual interests and shared values, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó told MTI from Tallinn by phone, adding that the two governments see eye to

eye concerning global and European challenges.

After talks with his Estonian counterpart Urmas Reinsalu, Szijjártó said that "both countries reject illegal migration and plans to change the European population". The two governments have set up an early warning mechanism to prevent the United Nations from integrating its global migration compact into international law. "Regrettably, there are clandestine endeavours to do so," he said.

"We also agree that Europe must be protected; we stand ready to fight for the preservation of our own way of life, national identity, as well as religious, cultural and historical heritage," he said.

Both Hungary and Estonia see the situation at the Turkey-Greece border as a serious security challenge, Szijjártó said, adding that Greece must fulfil its obligations to protect the EU's external borders.

At the talks, the two ministers signed a cooperation agreement to jointly support persecuted Christian communities in the Middle East, mainly in Jordan.

Szijjártó noted a prosperous business cooperation between the two countries, and said that Estonian-founded Transferwise, a global financial services provider, would soon increase the staff of its Budapest centre to 400.

Later in the day, Szijjártó will attend the inauguration of the new building of the Hungarian embassy in Tallinn.

HUNGARY, AUSTRIA INTERIOR MINISTERS IN TALKS ON CORONAVIRUS

Hungarian Interior Minister Sándor Pintér and his Austrian counterpart, Karl Nehammer, discussed on the phone measures taken to contain the spread of the new coronavirus, the interior ministry said. The ministers briefed each other on steps taken to screen those arriving from Italy, and agreed to show "mutual understanding and trust" regarding their countries' steps against Covid-19. The ministers agreed to keep up a continuous exchange of information between Austria and Hungary, the statement said.

VIKING SIGYN CAPTAIN WON'T WAIVE RIGHT TO TRIAL

The Ukrainian boat captain charged in connection with last May's collision on the Danube has refused to waive his right to a trial. The prosecution has proposed a nine-year prison sentence and a nine-year ban on piloting boats on condition that the accused admitted guilt and waived his right to a trial. The accused rejected the deal and refused to testify. On May 29, the Viking Sigyn cruise ship collided with the Hableány sightseeing boat which had 33 South Korean tourists on board and a crew of two Hungarians. Seven tourists were rescued from the water after the collision and the rest died.

One of the bodies was not recovered. According to the charges, the captain was steering the cruise ship alone as it reached Margaret Bridge. He failed to attend to his duties for at least five minutes, according to the charges. During that time, his ship collided with the Hableány sightseeing boat and pushed it under water. The cruise ship's captain has been charged with fatal negligence and failing to provide assistance to persons in danger. Those acts are punishable with two to eleven years in prison under Hungarian law.

FINANCE MINISTER: TOURISM TO BE HIT BADLY BY CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

Hungary's tourism and hospitality sectors are expected to be hit severely by the new coronavirus outbreak, Finance Minister Mihály Varga said. In an interview with commercial Inforádió, Varga said already up to 40-50% hotels bookings have been cancelled as European and Chinese guests stay away. "It will be a good result if [the sectors] come out of this at break-even," he said. Depending on the severity of the outbreak, the government expects Hungarian economy to grow by 3.7% or possibly see negative growth of -0,3% in 2020, Varga said. He noted that the 2020 budget was drafted based on the assumption of economic growth of 4%. Reserves and the deficit were each planned at one percent of GDP, he said. The reserves, some 490 billion forints

(EUR 145.8bn) in absolute terms, can be used in emergencies, he said. However, this may prove insufficient should the crisis extend to multiple sectors, he added. The government has asked companies to assess the effects of the virus in various sectors so it can prepare specific measures, Varga said.

Other countries have so far only activated tools to avoid company insolvencies, he said. The Hungarian finance ministry is looking at steps to be taken should the outbreak merely slow down the economy, and others in case of a deep crisis, Varga said. It will react to the real needs of economic players and protect the achievements of the past ten years, he said. Some private citizens may find it difficult to pay back loans, Varga warned, and he advised caution in taking out new loans.

DOCTORS' CHAMBER CALLS ON GOVT TO PROVIDE HEALTH WORKERS WITH PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

The Hungarian Chamber of Doctors (MOK) has called on the government to equip health-care employees with protective gear. The chamber's head, Gyula Kincses, told a press conference that employees needed protection from the new coronavirus. Also, he said indebted hospitals should not have to bear the extra costs related to the epidemic, and he called on the government to cover the relevant financing. Meanwhile,

Kincses said that in light of the new coronavirus epidemic, the chamber would not insist on its demand on terminating voluntary overtime if wage negotiations fail.

MIGRATION PRESSURE AT SOUTHERN BORDER 'HAS INCREASED SIGNIFICANTLY'

Migration pressure at Hungary's southern border has increased significantly, a government official told a parliamentary committee. The government had taken the necessary measures, Károly Konrád, parliamentary state secretary at the interior ministry, said in the briefing to the national defence and law enforcement committee. It has strengthened the protection of the southern border and extended the national state of emergency due to mass migration to Sept. 7.

He said the European Union had so far failed to respond adequately to the migration crisis, though at the last meeting of EU interior ministers, it was agreed that protecting the

external borders should be a priority, he added. The announcement by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that Turkey would no longer hold back migrants put even greater pressure on the Hungarian borders, he said.

Tamás Harangozó, an opposition Socialist member of the committee, said the Turkish president's "political blackmail" on the migration issue had caused the greatest panic. He insisted that in the midst of the new coronavirus epidemic, the Turkish president's deeds were tantamount to "a war crime". He added that the situation presented a real danger to Hungarians.

Lajos Kósa, the (Fidesz) chairman of the committee, said that since the 43rd week of 2019, the number of migrants had increased significantly. In the past 24 hours, 142 people have tried to enter Hungary illegally. Since Jan. 1, action has been taken against 8,284 people, another official said, noting wide-scale people smuggling was a problem, with 89 associated criminal proceedings launched in 2019.

BUDAPEST INTL' BOOK FAIR, THEATRE FESTIVAL POSTPONED

This year's Budapest International Book Fair and the Madách International Theatre Festival (MITEM) have been postponed to a later date, organisers of the two events said. The decisions were announced just after the government had announced a state of emergency over the coronavirus epidemic and banned indoor events with more than 100 people attending and outdoor events with more than 500 attending.

The book fair, scheduled for April 23-26, is planned to be held at a later time, the Association of Hungarian Book Publishers and Distributors said on its website, adding that exhibitors will be advised about the new date later on.

MITEM, scheduled to last from April 8 to May 17, will be held at a later date, the National Theatre told MTI, adding that it will cancel all performances as of Wednesday.