

PHOTO OF THE DAY



National holiday marked with over 10 000 flags on main square of Nagykanizsa

MTI/György Varga

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

Szijjártó addresses Mercedes-Benz event

March 15th national holiday celebrations

TOP STORY

PM: NEW VIRUS IMPACT WARRANTS BUDGET RETHINK

The economic consequences of the Covid-19 epidemic are “incalculable”, and warrant a full review of Hungary’s 2020 budget and the planned budget for 2021, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said.

In a regular interview to public Kossuth Radio, Orbán said the budgets of local authorities and institutions would have to be revised as well. The government is working on economic protection action plans for specific sectors, he said, as not all areas will be equally hit. A new action plan and a corresponding budget must be devised with an aim to “restart a stalled economy”, he said.

Orbán also said Hungary’s legal system gave the government the power to work out swift and effective measures in response to the outbreak, which “it will not hesitate to impose”. He cautioned Hungarians against “entertaining the illusion” that the outbreak would be over within a few weeks. “This will go on for many months to come and we have to expect that our lives will change,” he said. He stressed that Hungary for now was only dealing with individual coronavirus cases and working to prevent clusters of cases. “I wouldn’t bet on us succeeding there, but for now we’re strengthening that line of defence that separates individual cases from clusters,” he said.

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ORBÁN: 'NO FINANCIAL RESTRICTIONS' TO EMERGENCY MEASURES

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, in a regular interview to public Kossuth Radio, said there were “no financial restrictions” to the emergency measures implemented by the government against the new coronavirus outbreak, stressing that human life was the priority.

Orbán said that unlike in most European countries, Hungary's constitution grants the government the power to suspend or subvert general constitutional principles in extraordinary situations and enact measures that are warranted depending on the severity of the given situation. The state of emergency, he said, could eventually warrant measures like bringing factories under state control. “It lies somewhere between the peaceful times of democracy and the state of war so you have to be careful with it.”

Orbán said he had proposed announcing the state of emergency after having seen that most European countries were failing to contain the virus. He noted that the state of emergency declared by the government on Wednesday could remain in force for a period of two weeks, after which time parliament's approval would be necessary for an extension.

Meanwhile, he said claims that the epidemic was over in China were false, explaining that the country had only passed the peak of the outbreak. Noting that it took 5-6 months for the outbreak

to peak in China, he argued that the number of coronavirus cases in Europe would continue rising for months to come. “We can't escape the virus,” he said, adding that the conditions of the Covid-19 patients in Hungary could yet worsen. “Because there are no drugs to counter the virus, all we can do is prevent it from spreading,” the prime minister said, noting that this was the reason why a strict response was necessary.

Orbán thanked the nurses, doctors and disease control experts dealing with the virus. He said the government was capable of mobilising the necessary number of health professionals to counter the virus, adding that though there was no shortage of the required medical equipment, he had ordered the procurement of spare supplies. He said Hungary was on the right track in its response to the outbreak. “We've faced many crisis situations and in times like these the people of Hungary stick together,” he said. “They perform exceptionally in times of trouble and have what it takes to work together to contain the virus.” Hungary is also in close contact with other countries in the region, Orbán said, adding that the most important thing was for the various countries to share their experiences with the virus with each other.

Concerning the closure of universities, Orbán said the government had decided to close campuses because of the “tens of thousands” of foreign nationals studying there. He added that because foreign students could not be separated from Hungarian students, it seemed reasonable to close campuses. The prime

minister said the government had opted against closing schools because children are less at risk of infection or if they do get infected, they tend to recover without getting sick. He added that the government would reconsider its decision if the situation changed. “What matters is that the elderly should interact with as few people as possible,” Orbán said. He added that school closures would mean the end of the school year, forcing teachers to go on leave without pay.

Orbán said the primary goal was to keep the number of cases and fatalities to a minimum, adding that the government was already “making plans for tomorrow and the day after”.

HUNGARY'S CONFIRMED CORONAVIRUS CASES RISE TO 19

Another three Hungarian men have been diagnosed with the new coronavirus in Hungary, raising the number of cases to 19, the website koronavirus.gov.hu said. One patient is a 67-year-old man with a lot of foreign contacts through his work, the government website for disseminating information on the epidemic said. Another is 41 years old and has recently travelled to the Netherlands and Britain, and the third man accompanied a person previously diagnosed with the virus on a journey to Israel, the website said. All three men have been placed in isolation at Budapest's St. László hospital. Of the 19 people diagnosed with Covid-19 in Hungary so far, nine

are Iranian citizens, nine Hungarians and one is British. The number of people in quarantine has grown to 79 while the health authority has done tests on 858 samples, the website said.

OPPOSITION SLAMS ORBÁN'S REMARKS ON CONTAINMENT MEASURES IN SCHOOLS

Opposition parties slammed Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's remarks regarding necessary measures in schools amid the new coronavirus outbreak. Socialist lawmaker Ágnes Kunhalmi, the deputy head of parliament's educational committee, insisted that Orbán had "threatened" teachers with placing them on unpaid leave in case of a comprehensive school shutdown. Kunhalmi noted that Hungary declared a national "state of emergency" and introduced a "special legal order" on Wednesday. In such a situation, the government has the power to deviate from legislature, she said. The government has the power under the "special legal order" to impart legislation acknowledging a shortened academic year as full, she said. Likewise, the government has the power to place teachers on paid leaves in case of a shutdown, she said. Money to pay the teachers for the period in question had been included in the 2020 budget, Kunhalmi said. There is no reason to strip them of paid leave, she added.

Kunhalmi called it a "stupid argument" that schools should

remain open because children are "not involved" in the epidemic. Children can also contract the virus and infect others, she said, calling the decision to keep schools open in the current situation "risky". Kunhalmi also noted that in the case of a confirmed Covid-19 patient, no tests were conducted on the patient's child, family or the child's class at a Budapest high school. Kunhalmi called on the government not to "skimp" on tests for the virus.

At another, online press conference, a lawmaker of the Párbeszéd party said the government should prolong the spring break in schools and bring its date ahead to double as a containment measure. Bence Tordai called on the government to consult trade unions on procedures for the remaining academic year and possibly on reducing the work load in schools. He called on the government to ensure full wages for teaching staff and "stop threatening them with completely baseless ideas like an unpaid leave." Tordai insisted the government was dragging its feet on a shutdown because its primary concern was GDP growth and not people's health. He called on the government to develop an "action plan to protect society", to modify this year's and review next year's budget.

Tordai proposed that parents keep their children home on their own responsibility, despite a government ban on such actions. "Parents can be smarter and wiser than the government ... let us start a movement

of civil disobedience, if you like," he said. Párbeszéd will submit an action plan of its own to parliament next week, Tordai said. The party is proposing a hike to minimum pensions and fostered workers' wages and raising the family allowance for single parents and large families, he said.

Conservative opposition Jobbik deputy leader Balázs Ander urged shutting down schools to combat the spread of the virus. This move has already been made in two dozens of countries, including 15 of the 28 European Union members and the other three countries of the Visegrad Group, Ander told a press conference. He cited the Italian model to continue paying teachers their wages and said the introduction of remote education could prevent the high number of cancelled classes which would make it necessary for pupils to repeat the year.

Teachers' trade union PDSZ called on the government to order a school break effective Monday in an open letter addressed to the operative board. Hungary should follow the practice already introduced in the majority of neighbouring countries, the letter said. If such a measure is not introduced, then schools where any of the pupils, teachers or staff get the virus should be able to close in a one-off procedure, the letter said. If the government fails not react to any of the proposals, then PDSZ will encourage parents to keep their children at home under an absence note, the trade union said.

ORBÁN: HUNGARY WON'T GIVE IN TO BRUSSELS' MIGRATION POLICY

Hungary is capable of defending its stance on migration and refuses to give in to Brussels's "flawed migration policy", Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in a radio interview. Only Hungarians have the right to decide whom they will allow into their country, the prime minister told Kossuth Radio. "This is a Hungarian matter, it's about our life and our country and we won't allow anyone to destroy our way of life and hard-fought achievements with bad ideas, advice or instructions," Orbán said. The prime minister said he understood the "tender-hearted" statements he said western European leaders often made, adding, however that these remarks tended to come off as "lecturing". Orbán said he ignores these "words of advice" because the European leaders who give them "live in an alternate reality", adding that Hungarians should be left to protect their country and way of life from migration.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: GERMANY SET TO DECIDE ON PROTECTIVE GEAR EXPORT TO HUNGARY

Germany is expected to make a decision soon on whether it will lift its ban on exports of protective medical equipment and fulfil Hungary's order for protective gear, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said. Addressing a press conference after a conference call with

his Visegrad Group (V4) and German counterparts, Szijjártó said the ministers had briefed each other on the status of the new coronavirus outbreak in their respective countries and the border measures they have taken as part of their response to the virus. He said Hungarian health institutions had ordered protective gear from abroad, including Germany, noting that the country has imposed a ban on exports of such supplies. Szijjártó said he had discussed the matter with his German counterpart earlier this week and had been promised that Germany would find a way to get the protective equipment to Hungary. Szijjártó said that in Friday's conference call, his German colleague said Germany had approved a new rule that allows exceptions to the ban when it comes to exporting equipment to other European Union countries. He said that hopefully, the body established to oversee the exports would soon reach a decision on shipping the equipment ordered by Hungarian health institutions.

Concerning migration, another issue on the agenda of the call, Szijjártó said the V4 and Germany expect Greece to protect the EU's external Schengen border. He said uncontrolled migration waves brought with them health risks, "especially in the current situation".

On another subject, he said the V4 ministers were briefed by their German counterpart on Germany's priorities for its EU presidency which it will take over from Croatia in July. Hungary and Poland made it clear in the call, he said, that they consider the Article 7 procedures launched against them to

be political in nature and were calling for the procedures to be brought to a conclusion. Concerning EU enlargement, Szijjártó said Hungary had reason to be optimistic about the upcoming meeting of the EU's General Affairs Council, provided that it goes ahead as scheduled for March 24. The countries monitoring the start of the accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia could become more flexible in their positions, he said, adding, at the same time, that this should not divert attention from the talks already in progress. Meanwhile, he said the planned summit between the V4 countries and the Turkish president has been postponed indefinitely.

At the end of the press conference, Szijjártó gave an update on the status of the Hungarian coronavirus patients abroad. Currently there are six Hungarian citizens quarantined in four countries. One is quarantined in Singapore and another in Vietnam after travelling on planes with infected people on board. Two others are crew members of the Grand Princess cruise ship that recently docked in Oakland, California, he said, adding that the other two Hungarians are in China's Hubei province.

HUNGARY REINTRODUCES BORDER CONTROLS WITH AUSTRIA, SLOVENIA

As part of Hungary's efforts to prevent the new coronavirus from spreading, the police will check on entrants at crossing points on the country's borders with Austria and Slovenia on a temporary basis, starting on Thursday, the police

reported on its website. According to the website, entrants from Austria of any nationality can use Hegyeshalom, Sopron, and Rábafüzes road crossing stations, while Hungarian and Austrian nationals are also allowed to enter the country at Kópháza, Kőszeg, Bucsú and Szentpéterfa. Entrants of any nationality are allowed to cross into Hungary from Slovenia at Tornyszentmiklós and Rédic, while Hungarians and Slovenians can also use Pince crossing station.

Meanwhile, Romanian Interior Minister Marcel Vela said the country is temporarily closing four border crossings with Hungary as part of the response to the new coronavirus outbreak. The crossings between Battonya and Turnu (Tornya), Létavértes and Săcueni (Székelyhíd), Méhkerék and Salonta (Nagyszalonta), and Nyirábrány and Valea lui Mihai (Érmihályfalva) will be closed and staff reassigned to larger crossings to optimise resources, Vela said. Romania is also closing smaller crossings with Ukraine and Bulgaria.

Austria also closed a number of its border crossings with Hungary, news agency APA reported. The country is keeping the Nickelsdorf (Miklósfalva), Klingensbach (Kelénpatak) and Heiligenkreuz (Rábakeresztúr) border crossings open to international traffic, while trains will be able to enter Hungary via the Szentgotthárd-Jennersdorf border crossing, APA said citing the Austrian police. Hungarian and Austrian citizens can cross the border at Pamhagen (Pomogy), Deutschkreutz (Sopronkeresztúr), Rattersdorf (Rótfalva), Schachendorf (Csajta) and Eberau (Monyorókerék).

MINISTRY: REPORTS OF PLANNED BUDAPEST LOCKDOWN 'FAKE NEWS'

The interior ministry slammed reports of plans to lock down Budapest over the new coronavirus outbreak as "fake news", saying that no such scenario was discussed at the meeting of the operative board coordinating Hungary's response to the virus. Police are investigating the source of the report, the ministry said in a statement. The operative board has urged the public to comply with the rules set by the authorities and to stick to credible sources when keeping updated on the virus.

WIZZ AIR CANCELS BUDAPEST-OSLO FLIGHTS

Hungarian low-cost carrier Wizz Air is cancelling its flights between Budapest and Oslo from March 16 until April 3, the company said. The Norwegian authorities have introduced new measures in response to the new coronavirus outbreak, Wizz Air said. Passengers with tickets for the cancelled flights can have 120% of the price added to their WIZZ accounts or have a 100% refund, Wizz Air said.

HUNGARY CANCELS STARTING STAGES OF GIRO D'ITALIA

Hungary will not host the starting stages of the Giro d'Italia in May

because of the coronavirus outbreak in Europe, a government official said. "Because of the serious epidemic in Europe, it will not be possible to organise the first three stages of the Giro d'Italia, the Grande Partenza, in May 2020," government commissioner Máriusz Révész said on his Facebook page.

He said the Hungarian organisers had communicated with the Italian organisers several times in the past three weeks and signalled that the race could not be allowed to endanger the security or the health of Hungarian people. At a video conference on March 12, the Hungarian committee organising the contest said the Grande Partenza could not take place on the originally planned dates, he added. "The sides agreed to make it a common goal to amend the [race] contract in the interest of starting the Giro d'Italia at a later time," Révész said.

Hungary was to have hosted the Grande Partenza starting stages of the Giro d'Italia, one of Europe's three cycling Grand Tours, from May 9 to 11. An individual time trial would have taken place in Budapest on Saturday, May 9; while the second stage would have started in the capital and finished in Győr (NW Hungary); and the third stage would have started in Székesfehérvár (C Hungary) and finished in Nagykanizsa, skirting the shores of Lake Balaton.

Hungary's government earlier allocated 7.7 billion forints (EUR 22.8m) for the organisation of the three stages.