

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI / Zsolt Czeglédi

Military patrols on the streets of Debrecen (E Hungary) to ensure public order during the coronavirus outbreak

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

Budapest mayor's presser on coronavirus response measures

TOP STORY

HUNGARY 'UNLIKELY TO AVOID MASS ILLNESSES'

The novel coronavirus outbreak in Hungary has not reached the stage of mass illnesses, but this is likely soon, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in an interview.

Medical professionals say large case numbers cannot be prevented, but the epidemic can be slowed down, Orbán told public broadcaster Kossuth Radio. The aim now is to slow down the virus's spread so the health-care system can handle serious cases, he added. "We have organised collective defence ... the Hungarian community is ready to protect itself," Orbán said. "We have a proper military plan of defence."

Orbán said it was expected that most patients in need of intensive care would be elderly but children with immunodeficiency were also endangered by the virus.

The prime minister said schools and designated kindergartens will accept the children of parents who cannot stay at home. Orbán insisted that the government had acted promptly on the advice of epidemiologists and caught the spread of the virus at an early stage of the epidemic, but mathematical models indicated that whereas the spread of the virus can be slowed down, in time the disease would be roughly evenly distributed across Europe.

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ORBÁN: HUNGARY MEDICAL EQUIPMENT SUFFICIENT TO HANDLE INFECTION RATE

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in a radio interview dismissed concerns about a lack of equipment in Hungary, saying the country's stock was sufficient to handle the current infection rate of the novel coronavirus. In the meanwhile, more equipment is being procured, he added. On the topic of protective gear, he said masks and protective clothing will be given to health-care staff first of all, then to public security staff and people working in public administration. He noted that masks are being produced in Hungary in prisons and elsewhere, and the raw materials are being sourced. "We are not pleading ... we're taking care of ourselves." Orbán said officials are in place. "Our people are in Beijing and Shanghai at the airports," he said. "Collective defence has been organised."

Regarding the spread of the virus in Europe, Orbán said the situation in Italy had resulted from an explosion in the number of illnesses coupled with a collapsing health-care system, but Hungary is increasing capacity in terms of equipment and manpower and slowing down the number of people in need of intensive care. A plan is in place to replace health-care staff who become ill in the meantime, he added. The foreign ministry is taking care of Hungarians stranded

abroad, the borders are closed, and humanitarian corridors are in place, he said, adding that there are a sufficient number of soldiers and police officers, and an epidemic hospital is under construction.

ORBÁN: ECONOMIC MEASURES AIM TO MINIMISE JOB LOSSES

The economic plans announced by the government as part of the response to the coronavirus outbreak aim to ensure that as few people lose their jobs as possible, and for those who do, they should get back to work as soon as possible, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán told public broadcaster Kossuth Radio. Whereas it is not possible to ensure this in all circumstances, help would be available to those who lose their jobs, he said, adding that the government is helping small businesses with a view to preventing layoffs. He said various government-decreed measures to help consumers ease their loan obligations would also ensure that "what's built over the last ten years will be reset". Orbán noted the amount of repayments to banks in the country totals an annual 3,600 billion forints (EUR 10.3bn). Asked whether banks were cooperating, he said: "From their reactions, yes." He noted that taxi drivers, caterers and hoteliers will enjoy tax relief for the duration of the crisis but further steps would be needed in this area.

Speaking about the elderly, he said: "If there's a mass epidemic, they will

face the greatest dangers and we're concerned about them." He said it would be preferable not to create mandatory rules for the elderly, but "I'm asking the elderly ... to stay at home". Orbán added that local councils had a duty to care for the elderly at home.

TWO ELDERLY CORONAVIRUS PATIENTS DIE AS CONFIRMED CASES REACH 85

Two elderly coronavirus patients have died, koronavirus.gov.hu said on Friday morning. A Hungarian man aged 79 and one aged 68 have died. Their deaths have increased the death toll in Hungary in connection with the virus to three.

Meanwhile, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in the country has risen to 85, the website said. Ten of the patients are Iranian, one is British, another Kazakh, and 73 are Hungarian. The epidemic in Hungary has entered its second phase, as the virus is being transmitted in communities rather than just from one individual to another, it added. The authorities are calling on the elderly and young people in particular to stay at home.

SZIJJÁRTÓ IN CLUJ: COUNTRIES IN REGION RELYING ON EACH OTHER

The current novel coronavirus epidemic shows just how much countries in the Carpathian Basin and

the broader region rely on each other, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said in Cluj (Kolozsvár). At a press conference held jointly with ethnic Hungarian party RMDSZ leader Hunor Kelemen, Szijjártó noted that the Hungarian government recently set up a humanitarian corridor for Romanians making their way from Austria to their homeland. The government at the same time asked the Romanian authorities to help avoid tailbacks on the Hungarian side of the border, he said.

“Regrettably, experiences so far aren’t positive,” he said. “Over night, tailbacks of 15-20km formed at the Hungarian-Romanian border due to Romanian border police procedures.” He added that Hungarian authorities had been able to successfully address that issue with their Austrian and Slovak counterparts, and they would not withhold their cooperation from Romania. Szijjártó said he hoped bilateral ties with Romania would be characterised by “mutual respect, mutual assistance and mutual loyalty.” Hungary is ready to build such relations, he added. The foreign minister noted that on the day he received his Romanian counterpart’s request to help Romanians return via Hungary, another Romanian government agency had fined the mayor of Sfântu Gheorghe (Sepsiszentgyörgy) several thousand euros for using Hungarian symbols on the day of Hungary’s March 15 national holiday. “It would be good to avoid such cases. We will help Romanian

nationals return to their homeland, but in these hard times we request that ties are governed by mutual assistance and reciprocated solidarity.”

Meanwhile, Szijjártó underscored the “vital importance” of ensuring the continued functioning of both countries’ economies. The Hungarian government has therefore asked Romania for its cooperation in facilitating smooth road haulage. He noted that the turnover of bilateral trade was worth 8.3 billion euros last year, adding that the uninterrupted transport of goods was of “critical importance” in terms of supplying residents.

Concerning his current trip to Romania, Szijjártó said that arrangements had been made before the coronavirus outbreak, adding that it was important to focus on “future cooperation beyond the virus”. He said that the Hungarian government was ready to continue its economic scheme aimed at promoting ethnic Hungarian businesses in Romania. The Hungarian government has so far awarded 47 billion forints (EUR 134m), contributing to a total 6,000 projects which have created investments worth a combined 87 billion forints, he added. “We are ready to roll out the scheme to the Partium [in north-western Romania] and will start preparations, circumstances permitting.” Szijjártó added that the government is also planning to continue its programme of building nurseries for ethnic Hungarian communities.

Kelemen asked Szijjártó to help find a solution for Hungarian and Romanian nationals who have so far commuted to work to the other side of the border. Recent epidemic-related measures have made commuting impossible, jeopardising the subsistence of thousands, he said.

WHO: SCREENING ALL HUNGARIANS WOULD BE ILLOGICAL

The position of the World Health Organisation (WHO) is that it would be illogical to screen the entire population of Hungary against the novel coronavirus. Tests should be done only on people showing symptoms and those who have come into contact with infected people, the head of the organisation’s country office said.

Ledia Lazeri told public broadcaster Kossuth Radio that the latest figures showed that the Hungarian authorities were doing their job and had been able to identify new cases and carry out tests when necessary. WHO is in daily contact with the Human Resources Ministry and the National Centre for Public Health, and information is being shared, with WHO offering practical advice and monitoring the Hungarian government’s measures. Lazeri said it was a milestone that no new cases have been reported from China in the past 24 hours because this showed that the method to stop to epidemic is known.

Numbers are expected to grow further in Europe but the measures introduced so far give reason to expect

that the epidemic will peak in Europe with a lower case count, she added.

CORONAVIRUS - CHINESE FENCERS RETURNING FROM HUNGARY TEST POSITIVE

Three Chinese fencers tested positive for the novel coronavirus on their arrival in China from Hungary, the Chinese fencing federation has reported. According to the federation, the fencers had participated in the Westend Epee Grand Prix held behind closed doors in Budapest between March 6 and 8, adding that the tests of three South Korean fencers participating in the same event have also come back positive. Originally, the Chinese team was scheduled to leave Hungary after Olympic qualifiers that were to be held on March 22-24, but the international federation announced the cancellation of all international events for the next month, and they left on March 16. The three Chinese fencers have been hospitalised with mild symptoms of Covid-19, the federation said.

Hungarian fencing federation MVSZ said that all participants had made statements prior to the competition that they had been tested negative for coronavirus and that they had not visited areas hit by the epidemic. According to information from the South Korean federation, one of the South Korean fencers, a woman, had reported a sore throat while still in Hungary.

SZÁZADVÉG: HUNGARIANS WANT NATIONAL COOPERATION, NO POLITICKING

Respondents to a recent Századvég survey have said they want to see national cooperation and not politicking when it comes to handling the novel coronavirus epidemic. Referring to their latest survey, the Századvég Foundation said the vast majority of respondents were looking to Hungary's dominant political forces to unite, with 87% saying Hungary's political parties should set aside their disputes. The survey of 1,000 adults found this view reflected across political divides, with 81% of leftist respondents and 88% of centrists supporting that position, Századvég said. Fully 91% of right-wing supporters called for unity and cooperation, it added. According to Századvég, even supporters of the parties most critical of government policies reject political division, with 81% of leftist Democratic Coalition supporters and the same ratio of conservative Jobbik voters saying they were against political divisiveness.

JOBBIK DEMANDS WITHDRAWAL OF ARMY UNITS FROM COMPANIES

Conservative opposition Jobbik has demanded the withdrawal of a government decree delegating soldiers, police and disaster

management forces to the premises of important Hungarian companies. Sending the uniformed forces to companies "surely serves [Prime Minister] Viktor Orbán's power endeavours, but this definitely does not serve the fight against coronavirus," party lawmaker Andrea Varga-Damm told an online press conference. She insisted that the government decree was unlawful, not being grounded either by the constitution or the state of emergency provision. The law states that companies can be obliged to carry out certain activities in a state of emergency, including producing certain goods and providing certain services for the state, she said, but their obligations stopped there.

If the situation gets more critical, the finance minister was within his rights to appoint a commissioner to the companies, she added. Hungarian laws do not allow for soldiers to be sent to attend the premises of companies, she said, adding that none of the companies in question had indicated their operations were endangered. Jobbik will not support any measures at next week's parliamentary session that serve to bolster Orbán's powers, she said.

OPPOSITION PARTIES PRESENT CRISIS-MANAGEMENT PROPOSALS

The opposition Socialists called for social services to be strengthened, while LMP has proposed exempting companies

from tax and contribution payments. Párbeszéd said the government should introduce a basic income as a crisis-management measure.

The Socialists's Lajos Korózs, who heads parliament's welfare committee, told an online press conference that home-help services, free meals for the needy, care services in villages and help for the homeless needed extra resources. He also proposed one-off payment of 20,000 forints (EUR 60) to retirees whose pensions are worth less than 100,000 forints.

LMP lawmaker Antal Csárdi said companies should be exempted from tax and contribution payments, and any rent payable to the state or local council for company premises should be waived. In a video message sent to the press, he said personal income tax payments should also be suspended in a bracket up to the level of the average wage.

Bence Tordai of Párbeszéd told an online press conference that a basic income of monthly 100,000 forints should be paid to all those in need. The 1,400 billion forints that would be required can be paid from the money available due to suspended or cancelled investment projects, and from a solidarity crisis tax, he added. The latter should be imposed on assets worth over 500 million forints and monthly salaries of over 1 million forints, he said.

FORINT TOUCHES RECORD LOW AGAINST EURO, DOLLAR

The forint has hit record lows against the euro, US dollar and the Swiss franc.

The euro was quoted at nearly 357.49 forints on Friday morning after having scraped a record low of 360.10 on Thursday. The Swiss franc traded slightly at 339.41 forints on Friday morning after a low of 339.57 on Thursday evening. The forint rebounded against the dollar on Friday morning having reached record lows on Thursday, swinging from 334.64 on Thursday evening to 332.40 on Friday morning.

WAITING TIMES FOR LORRIES UP AT 12 HOURS AT ROMANIAN BORDER

Waiting times for lorries at the Csanádpalota border crossing between Romania and Hungary have increased to 12 hours, with police and disaster management officials handing out water to drivers, Csongrád county police said on Friday. An over 35km tailback has developed on the M43 motorway consisting of lorries heading for Romania, spokeswoman Szilvia Szabó said. Waiting times for passenger traffic leaving Hungary are three hours, she added.

MOST BUSINESSES IN BUDAPEST SEE BLEAK OUTLOOK

Fully 93% of businesses in the capital believe their outlook is bleak, according to a flash survey conducted by the Budapest Chamber of Industry and Commerce (BKIK) on the impact of the coronavirus crisis. The survey covered 1,895 Budapest-based companies, of

which 83% are microbusinesses, 15% SMEs and 1% large companies. BKIK noted that one-third of the companies have their employees working from home, 19% have sent them on unpaid leave and 12% on paid leave.

The survey shows the ratio of home office work increases in proportion to the size of the company. Fully 80% of large companies have shifted to home-office work, while only 51% of small businesses have done so. Altogether 55% of medium-sized companies have home-office arrangements in place.

Only one-fifth of the companies had a contingency plan for such situations, but 34% of the remaining ones are now drawing up an emergency plan, and 15% are considering doing so. BKIK said 60% of the companies have experienced a decline in orders and 40% a drop in the number of guests, customers, consumers and clients.

In response to a question about what kind of help they would find useful under the circumstances, 40% of the companies said they would support the establishment of a fund to provide preferential credit or guarantees to companies to help them cope with temporary liquidity problems on condition that they maintain their headcount.

EU PROJECT PRE-FINANCING LIFTS DEFICIT TO 69.4% / FY TARGET IN FEB

Hungary's cash flow-based budget, excluding local councils, was 254.6

billion forints (EUR 72m) in the red at the end of February, the Finance Ministry said in a final reading. The deficit reached 69.4% of the 367 billion forint full-year target.

The ministry data show that pre-financing for European Union-funded projects had a marked impact on the central budget. In January-February, payouts for those projects came to 569.4 billion forints, while transfers from Brussels reached just 61.2 billion forints. The ministry noted that in the base period, payouts for EU-funded projects came to 200.2 billion forints and were more than matched by 281.4 billion forints in transfers from Brussels.

The central budget ran a 283.7 billion forint deficit at the end February, while separate state funds were 36.3 billion forints in the black and the social insurance funds were 7.2 billion forints in the red. In February alone, the general government deficit reached 345 billion forints.

On the revenue side, revenue from value-added tax reached 15%

of the full-year target by the end of February, while revenue from personal income tax stood at 17.3%. Revenue from payroll tax was 16.5% of the full-year target, the ministry said. In spite of tax cuts, economic growth lifted revenue from VAT by 56.4 billion forints, revenue from personal income tax by 40.1 billion forints and revenue from corporate profit tax rose by 35.3 billion forints, it added.

CHARGES RAISED AGAINST WW2 COMPENSATION SCAMMER

Charges have been raised against a 34-year-old woman for deceiving more than four hundred people in cooperation with a family member by promising them compensation payments for losses made during WW2. Starting from September 2017, the late father-in-law of the woman from Szentendre, near Budapest, advertised a service online to arrange compensation payments for people

born before 1944 whose relatives died or were POWs during the war, Gyula Bóna, the Nógrád county chief prosecutor, said in a statement.

The man promised to arrange compensation of hundreds of thousands of forints — and even one million forints from time to time — against an “administration cost” of 1,500-3,000 forints (EUR 4.30-8.60) for each applicant. He used forms showing the logos of fictitious Roma parties and associations, Bóna said. After expanding his operation to the whole of Hungary, he collected money from 375 people, each paying a “registration fee” ranging between 1,500 forints and 12,000 forints. The father-in-law has since died but the money received was spent by the family. The prosecutor’s office raised charges against the woman for 409 counts of fraud committed as part of a group and proposed a suspended prison sentence, as well as compensation for the victims. Assets worth over 900,000 forints are to be seized.