

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Zoltán Balogh

No masses celebrated at Budapest's St. Stephen's Basilica

UPCOMING EVENTS

Parliament meets

Coronavirus updates

EU foreign ministers meet in teleconference

TOP STORY

CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER: CORONAVIRUS CASES 'SPREAD EVENLY' IN HUNGARY

Cases of the new coronavirus have been confirmed in even numbers across Hungary, with no epicentre detected, Cecília Müller, the chief medical officer, said.

Speaking at a press conference of the operative board coordinating the epidemic response, Tibor Lakatos, head of the board's emergency centre, said that the current situation does not warrant the introduction of curfews.

Müller said that the second coronavirus tests conducted on the contacts of the Moroccan transport minister, Hungary's Interior Minister Sándor Pintér among them, have tested negative.

Regarding regulations for home quarantines, whether voluntary or ordered by the authorities, Müller said persons under quarantine should not leave their homes, even for short periods of time. They should separate themselves from others in the household, and use, if possible, separate bathrooms and utensils, and disinfect frequently, she said. Müller also called for a heightened regard for the health of the elderly who are much more vulnerable to the virus than other demographic groups. Infants with undeveloped immune systems should also be shielded, she said. The operative board does not plan to restrict the movements of the elderly, and hopes they will heed their advice, she said.

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HUNGARY CONFIRMED CASES RISE TO 131

The number of confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus infection in Hungary has risen to 131, koronavirus.gov.hu said on Sunday.

Ten of the patients are Iranians, two British, one is Kazakh, another Vietnamese, and 117 are Hungarians, the government website for disseminating information on the epidemic said.

János Szlávik, chief infectologist at Budapest's St. László hospital, told an online press conference that two further patients have died, a 65-year-old man and a 75-year-old woman, bringing Hungary's toll to six. He said the average age of those dead is 66 years, while the average age of seven patients in intensive care is 69 years. There are seniors, middle aged people and also children among the patients, he said, adding that fatalities among children were extremely rare. According to the government website, 16 people have so far recovered from the infection. Isolated in hospital are 115 patients and 4,443 samples have been tested.

GOVT, FIDESZ CALL ON PARLT TO PASS CORONAVIRUS LAW

The head of the Prime Minister's Office and the group leader of ruling Fidesz called on parliament in a joint Facebook video message to pass the government's proposal to extend the state of emergency with regard to the

novel coronavirus epidemic. Group leader Máté Kocsis urged that parliament should confirm the government's measures taken so far and authorise the government to take further steps.

Concerning measures so far, PM office head Gergely Gulyás said that the government had ordered a moratorium on loan payments, it closed schools and banned public gatherings. It has exempted employers in ailing sectors from paying labour and employees from paying social and health care contributions. The government is also working to protect jobs, and has closed down Hungary's borders, Gulyás added. Kocsis asked all other parties in parliament to support that parliament should discuss the bill on Monday and vote for it the next day.

OPPOSITION PARTIES AGAINST EPIDEMIC RESPONSE BILL

The opposition Democratic Coalition (DK) and green LMP parties said the government's coronavirus response bill would grant the government special powers for an indefinite length of time. DK deputy head Csaba Molnár told an online press conference that the party will not vote in favour of the bill, nor for parliament to discuss it in an extraordinary session. Molnár said that so far, 16 European Union member states had introduced a special legal order in view of the pandemic. However, none of them have done so indefinitely or without specifying the areas the government's special powers pertain

to -- that would be "unimaginable in a democratic state based on the rule of law", Molnár said. DK specified four "conditions" for the government to be granted such powers, he said. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán "can see this as DK's ultimatum," he added. The government's special powers should be granted for a limited time, and be restricted to measures pertaining to the epidemic response and its impact on the economy, he said. The government may not be allowed to use the pandemic to exercise extraordinary powers at other areas, he said. During the state of emergency, all parliamentary group leaders should have the right to turn to the constitutional court which would be obliged to rule on their complaints within three days, he said. DK will not support any regulations curbing the freedom of the press and muzzling independent media, he said.

At a separate, online press conference, green LMP said the government's special powers must be granted for a limited time only. The time frame must be laid down in law, LMP co-leader Erzsébet Schmuck said. Regarding economic measures to offset the economic impact of the pandemic, Schmuck said that by suspending "investments not serving the development of Hungarian economy", such as the upgrade of the Paks nuclear plant and the Budapest-Belgrade railway line, some 600 billion forints (EUR 1.7bn) could be re-allocated to epidemic response. Those funds should be used to support people losing their jobs due to the epidemic, SMEs and local authorities, Schmuck said.

ORBÁN, VUČIĆ PLEDGE COOPERATION IN EPIDEMIC RESPONSE

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić on Sunday pledged constant contact and cooperation in the two countries’ response to the new coronavirus epidemic, the prime minister’s press chief said. At a meeting in Budapest, Vucic and Orbán discussed the situation at the Serbian-Hungarian border. They also pledged mutual solidarity and a mutual flow of information during the epidemic, Bertalan Havasi said. Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó and Serbian Finance Minister Siniša Mali also attended the meeting. After talks with Mali, Szijjártó said in a video posted on Facebook that Serbia and Hungary are strongly inter-dependent, especially in “such a challenging situation”. Ensuring a continuous flow of goods across the Hungarian-Serbian border is an “important duty”, Szijjártó said, to provide supplies to Hungarians and Serbians alike. The volume of trade between the two countries reached 2.5 billion euros last year, Szijjártó noted. Measures to “restart” the economy will also be coordinated, Szijjártó said.

ORBÁN OFFERS HUNGARY’S HELP IN CROATIA EARTHQUAKE RELIEF

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán expressed his condolences and offered help

to Croatia, which was hit by an earthquake on Sunday morning. In his letter to Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, Orbán said he was “saddened” by the reports on the natural disaster, which caused damage and injuries in and around Zagreb. “I believe that in these trying times it is important for the nations of Central Europe to express their solidarity with one another in every possible way. On behalf of the Hungarian people, I would like to express my sympathy and offer the assistance of Hungary,” Orbán said. Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó offered his condolences to those injured, and wished them a speedy recovery in a Facebook post. Croatia can count on Hungary’s help in the reconstruction, he said.

House Speaker László Kövér sent a telegram to his Croatian counterpart Gordan Jandroković, expressing his sympathies to Croatians who “had to face this fearful natural disaster while living through an epidemic emergency”. Hungary is ready to provide help to Croatia at this challenging time, the speaker said.

KOVÁCS: ‘SPREADING FALSE INFORMATION DURING A STATE OF EMERGENCY IS WRONG AND DANGEROUS’

The Hungarian bill granting special powers to the government for the fight against the new coronavirus epidemic aims to stop fake news from undermining the efforts,

Zoltán Kovács, the state secretary for international communications and relations, said in a blog post on abouthungary.hu. Kovács reacted to reports on the bill submitted on Friday that would extend the duration of the extraordinary measures (those put in place to fight the coronavirus) until the end of the state of emergency. The bill includes provisions to cover the possibility of a “forced parliamentary break”, which some media said was “prompting concerns”, he said.

The state secretary said that the measure was necessary because “if Parliament has no quorum (because more than half of the MPs are missing), it will not be able to extend the state of emergency. The bill would also prohibit elections or referendums until the end of the state of emergency. “Mind you, Hungary doesn’t have any elections scheduled in the near future,” he noted. The bill would make it a criminal offense to spread false information to confuse large groups of people or hamper the virus containment efforts, Kovács said. “What was the response from the liberal, mainstream press? Orbán is going to jail journalists!” he said. In reaction, Kovács said “Hungarian law is ... creating sanction for reckless speech that could impair or thwart efforts to protect people from the spread of the virus. We’re in a state of emergency, by the way. Lives are at stake. This gross distortion of the facts is biased and irresponsible.”

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KARÁCSONY: BUDAPEST IN NEED OF 1 M FACE MASKS

Budapest will need a supply of at least one million FFP2 face masks with particle filters over the coming period in light of the spread of the novel coronavirus, Mayor Gergely Karácsony said. The masks would primarily serve to protect health-care and social sector workers, Karácsony told an online press conference streamed on his Facebook page. In addition, at least another 5 million surgical masks are needed to be distributed to the public, he said. Karácsony said the metropolitan council had notified the government both of its own supply needs and those of the capital's districts on Friday, adding that the capital is doing everything it can to procure the necessary protective equipment. He said ensuring the supply of the necessary protective gear was not a question of money, adding, at the same time, that the equipment was hard to get hold of.

Meanwhile, Karácsony announced that from March to June the city council will not collect rent from small and medium-sized companies that rent space from the city council. Further, the capital will create the legal conditions to exempt businesses that do not lay off staff from paying rent for the period in question in the future either, he added. On the subject of parking, Karácsony said

that following talks between the metropolitan council and Budapest's shopping malls, the city's Arena and MOM Park malls have agreed to provide free parking in their parking lots. Talks with the other malls are still ongoing, he added. The mayor also said that several hundreds of Budapesters in various districts have got involved in helping to look after the elderly. He thanked car-sharing services MOL Limo and GreenGo for offering their services to be used free of charge when it comes to caring for elderly residents. Deputy Mayor Gábor Kerpel-Fronius said the metropolitan council has launched its own website providing updates about the coronavirus outbreak, which can be accessed at koronavirus.budapest.hu.

HUNGARY BEEFS UP MILITARY PRESENCE ALONG NORTHERN BORDER

The Hungarian Armed Forces have beefed up their presence along the country's northern border, the defence ministry has said. At present, over 100 soldiers are serving along the borders with Austria and Slovakia, it said on the honvedelem.hu website. The ministry noted that soldiers had been involved in border control for several years. In January this year, for instance, another contingent of soldiers was sent to Hungary's southern border, with Serbia, to help contain illegal migrants, it said.

SOCIALISTS PROPOSE NEW ECONOMIC POLICY MEASURES

The opposition Socialist Party has proposed measures which it said would increase "security, predictability, calm and confidence" amidst the novel coronavirus epidemic. The government should take immediate measures to protect the forint as a 10% depreciation of Hungary's currency entails a 1 percentage point increase in the rate of inflation, deputy leader László Szakács said. He reiterated the proposal for extending unemployment benefits from three to nine months, and raising its amount to a monthly 100,000 forints (EUR 280). The Socialists also propose setting up a wage guarantee fund so that those who would otherwise be laid off could keep their job, he said. Szakács stressed the need for a programme boosting the economy so that Hungarian SMEs could survive the current crisis.

JOBBIK CALLS FOR NATIONWIDE MANDATORY HOME QUARANTINE

The opposition Jobbik party has called on the government to introduce a mandatory, nationwide home quarantine to protect Hungarians from the new coronavirus. Márton Gyöngyösi, the conservative party's MEP, insisted that Viktor Orbán's

government sees the epidemic as a tool to strengthen and expand its power “which was shaken in last year’s municipal and European parliamentary elections”. Fidesz has used the situation for introducing a special order of rule by decrees and putting private companies under military control, he said. Fortunately, Hungary is among the countries where the virus emerged relatively late, so it has the opportunity to learn from other countries’ examples, Gyöngyösi said. A growing number of states recognise home quarantine as an effective method to fight the spread of the virus, he added.

DK CALLS ON GOVT TO PUBLISH VIRUS MAP

The opposition Democratic Coalition (DK) has called on the government to make Hungary’s “virus map” public as part of the response to the new coronavirus epidemic. Party spokesman Balázs Barkóczi told an online press conference that all

European countries, “even Russia”, had published virus maps. Paradoxically, the government is “contributing to the spread of fake news” by holding back crucial information, he said. The epidemiologists and doctors DK has consulted said that a virus map providing data broken down by regions, gender and age would be of great help in the epidemic response and would by no means violate personal rights, Barkóczi said.

At another press conference over the weekend, DK called on the government to start mass testing for the novel coronavirus. Health expert Zoltán Komáromi told an online press conference no other country in the world has reported as even and gradual increase in the number of infections as Hungary did, insisting that many countries have been carrying out as many tests daily as Hungary has done in total so far. Komáromi said there was reason to assume that the Hungarian government did not want to know or did not want to report the actual number of infections. “Sticking

one’s head in the sand puts people’s lives in danger,” he added. He called for tests to be carried out also on people who already died of pneumonia or similar causes, arguing that their contacts could also be infected now.

STATE-OWNED COMPANY STARTS MAKING SURGICAL MASKS

Kézmű, a state-owned company that employs Hungarians living with disabilities, has started making surgical masks, state secretary Attila Fülöp announced at the Kézmű factory in Budapest. The first masks produced will go to those most vulnerable to the new coronavirus: residents and staff of retirement homes, Fülöp said.

Kézmű-Erfo-Főkefe managing director Péter Csizi said the company could turn out as many as 30,000 masks a day. The double-layer textile masks are washable and can be reused, he added. The group employs 9,000 people at 136 bases around the country.