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TOP STORY

ORBÁN: HUNGARY IN FOR THE LONG HAUL

Hungary is at the start of a long period of protective measures against the novel coronavirus, Viktor Orbán has said.

The prime minister told parliament that in the West there was now a shortage of equipment needed for protection against the virus, and help is only available from “the East”, where “we have secured huge stocks”. Supplies will arrive continually and “more than ten aircraft are in service”. Orbán called on lawmakers to put aside political disputes and stand together. Cooperation will be crucial in the difficult times to come, he added. “The more people cooperate, the more lives we can save,” he said. Regarding border protection measures, Orbán said Hungary had an interest in maintaining friendly relations with its neighbours, “so they can count on our help”. Regarding economic measures to mitigate the epidemic’s impact, Orbán said the first task was to forestall the slowdown of the economy, then take steps to “restart” it. On the moratorium on loan payments, which the government announced last week, Orbán said the “banks will not be left to fend for themselves”, as the central bank will ensure their liquidity for 2020.

ORBÁN: GOVT FOCUSING ON FOUR ASPECTS OF EPIDEMIC RESPONSE

The government has organised its response to the new coronavirus outbreak along the policing, military, health-care and economic aspects of combatting the epidemic, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said. "We will have to succeed on four battlefields simultaneously," Orbán said in an online press conference.

The epidemic in Hungary is "growing by leaps and bounds" and nearing the stage of mass infections, Orbán said, noting that the number of confirmed cases had risen to 167 by Monday morning. There are only estimates of the number of people who have actually contracted the virus, Orbán said. It is "certainly" much higher than the confirmed 167, he said.

Of those confirmed to have the virus, 108 are carriers without symptoms, Orbán said. Of those showing symptoms of Covid-19, 27 are mildly ill and will probably recover. Nine patients are gravely ill and in intensive care, he said. All 7 fatalities had chronic illnesses, and their average age was 69, Orbán said.

Regarding economic measures, Orbán said a total of 81,480 small companies will benefit from a tax exemption until June 30. Like the exemption granted for taxi drivers, entrepreneurs such as hairdressers, beauticians, decorators, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, as well as

artists and providers of health, sports, and some welfare services will be exempted from paying the Itemised Tax for Small Businesses (KATA), he said. Orbán said businesses will be granted an extended deadline to settle their "kata" tax arrears accumulated before March 1, to be paid in the first quarter after the state of emergency is lifted. Media providers will also be exempted from paying their tax on lost advertising revenues, the prime minister said.

Evictions, property seizures and tax collection procedures will be suspended, and taxpayers will not be required to pay their arrears until after the end of the state of emergency, he said. Young mothers whose right to child benefits would terminate during the state of emergency, will continue to receive their benefits, the prime minister said.

Meanwhile, Orbán said that doctors and nurses working with patients in intensive care will be provided special masks starting on Tuesday morning. All other doctors and nurses in hospital will be given surgical masks, he added.

Orbán asked everyone to handle resources economically, saying the country was preparing for a protracted epidemic. The government is working on protecting jobs, Orbán said. Those who lose theirs will be helped to find a new one as soon as possible, he said.

Regarding protective equipment, Orbán said Hungary currently has 1.5 million surgical masks, with 25,000 being manufactured daily. Production

is being ramped up to 80,000 a day, he said. The country has 2,560 ventilators, he added. Hungary has ordered "huge batches" of protective gear "from the East", Orbán said, with over ten planes expected to deliver the goods. Concerning details of Hungary's hospital capacity, Orbán said the country has 66,906 hospital beds, 19,431 doctors under the age of 65, 4,312 residents and 900 medical students in their final year, making up a total medical staff of 24,643, adding that the number of nurses younger than 65 totalled 105,000.

The prime minister said that the country has 70,275 operative police officers under 65, and 46,573 volunteers such as civilian guards. The Hungarian military has 23,950 professional soldiers and 9,381 reserve troops, while there are 10,649 former soldiers that quit the army during the past five years, Orbán said, adding that they take a crucial role in border control and are making preparations to cooperate with the police should street patrols become necessary. Altogether 139,684 officers are on hand currently to maintain public order, including the enforcement of quarantine or curfew regulations, should the need arise, Orbán said.

Orbán confirmed that foreigners on their way to their homelands can continue crossing Hungary through designated corridors. He said that humanitarian aspects continued to be important, adding that "we want to make our neighbours friends". Orbán said he expected a difficult period to

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come, which would require personal sacrifices from everyone.

“The more we cooperate the more lives we will be able to save. We are facing a task that nobody could tackle alone. Every one of us has a responsibility ... rather than divisions and disputes the time has come to work together.”

The Hungarian government will handle the crisis brought on by the new coronavirus epidemic even if the opposition does not vote to prolong the state of emergency, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in parliament on Monday, ahead of the debate of the government’s epidemic response bill which has been slammed by opposition lawmakers who say the bill hands the government excessive powers.

Speaking in parliament after his speech detailing the government’s response to the crisis so far, Orbán said: “The situation is difficult and worse is to come.” Orbán called on ruling party lawmakers to “be brave ... the 133 bravest people in the country”, and vote for the measures to help the country. “Never mind what the opposition is afraid of,” he said. Pro-government lawmakers “should not flinch”. Regarding the timeframe of a prolonged state of emergency rejected by the opposition, Orbán said the government did not need a fixed time limit. Parliament, he said, would have the right to “call it quits” every day. If it passes the law, parliament will have the power to strip the government of its special powers any day, he said.

Of the 90 day limit proposed by multiple opposition parties, Orbán said the country “will be in worse shape in 90 days than it is now”. The protective measures put in place are aimed at slowing down the epidemic so that it does not overwhelm the health-care system, he said. The slower the epidemic spreads, the longer it takes to run its course, Orbán said. “It will be a lot longer than three months.”

The measures taken so far are sufficient, Orbán said. Although new steps will be necessary, “there is no need to underestimate the fact that we have left 3,600 billion forints [EUR 10.2bn] in people’s pockets,” he said.

Regarding schools, Orbán said schools were not closed but were operating in the digital domain. Students, he added, would still have a chance to finish the academic year.

On the issue of ordering a curfew, Orbán said the government was keeping that possibility on the agenda, even though a total curfew, he added, would probably be impossible to impose. Currently, Hungary is heeding the experiences of other countries, primarily Austria’s, he said.

Addressing the economic proposals of opposition parties to offset the impact of the epidemic, Orbán insisted that they had largely proposed austerity measures. Such steps would cost the country jobs, and the government, he said, was working to preserve them. They aim to provide jobs as opposed to welfare, he said.

LAKATOS: 218 HUNGARIANS QUARANTINED WORLDWIDE

Overall 218 Hungarians are in quarantine in other countries due to the coronavirus epidemic, Tibor Lakatos, emergency centre head of the operative board in charge of Hungary’s efforts against the outbreak, said. The majority, 187 Hungarians, have been isolated in Austria, while one person is in quarantine in Germany, and 30 in countries outside Europe, Lakatos said.

Meanwhile, he insisted that Hungary has sufficient medical supplies in terms of both protective equipment and materials.

In his response to a question about possible curfews, Lakatos said that introducing any restrictions required careful consideration, including such aspects as whether those measures could be enforced and whether measures seriously impacting the life of people are in proportion to the hazard. Should epicentres of the infection appear, the movements of people should be restricted in a way that does not compromise local supplies, he added. He also said that the current opening restrictions for shops seemed to be sufficient, but if further measures were taken, opening hours may be changed accordingly. “In any extraordinary situation we will ensure supplies for residents,” he pledged.



On another subject, Lakatos said that legal proceedings have been initiated against 11 people suspected of fraud, against 14 suspected of spreading rumours and another 12 threatening with endangering the public. He noted that a bill currently before parliament would increase penalties for spreading rumours.

So far, the authorities have ordered self-isolation of over 4,000 people entering the country, and initiated proceedings against 100 for violating quarantine regulations, Lakatos said.

CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER: PATIENTS DIAGNOSED IN ALL COUNTIES

People infected with the new coronavirus have been found in all counties in Hungary, Cecilia Müller, the chief medical officer, said. The number of people to have contracted Covid-19 has started to grow exponentially. In the past 24 hours alone, 36 patients have been confirmed to be suffering from the disease, she noted. In order to minimise the number of personal meetings, procedures have changed so that ambulances visit the potentially infected, take the tests and transport the samples to the laboratories, she said. The health-care system is working to adapt even to a worst-case scenario by increasing capacities and maintaining research, she said.

In response to news reports about foreign students getting the blame for bringing the virus to Hungary, she said these were baseless. "Nobody can

be blamed for how a virus is spread from one person to another," she said. Rules fighting the spread of the virus, such as avoiding community meetings and keep social distancing, must be respected, she warned.

GULYÁS: PARLT KEY TO SUSTAINING EPIDEMIC DEFENCE MEASURES

Gergely Gulyás, the head of the Prime Minister's Office, called opposition arguments to limit the duration of the state of emergency "sanctimonious", saying the right to set such a timeframe was, according to the constitution, vested in the government. As a gesture to the opposition, the government has already transferred the right to declare the end of the emergency to parliament, he said. However, the end of this crisis was, at present, impossible to project, he said.

The opposition parties have argued that none of the European Union member states that have introduced a special legal order in response to the pandemic had done so indefinitely or without specifying the limits of their governments' emergency powers.

Gulyás said ruling Fidesz had considered "countless" proposals put forward by the opposition, and incorporated many of them into the epidemic response bill, including a necessity and proportionality clause. He noted that no restrictions could be imposed on the sessions of parliament or the Constitutional Court during the

state of emergency. In response to a question, Gulyás slammed opposition allegations that the bill would infringe on media freedom as "lies", insisting that the bill did not touch on the issue of media freedom in any way. Gulyás called on the opposition to "consider, in the current situation, whether they want to engage in baseless scaremongering". "Hard times call for cooperation," Gulyás said, urging the parties to end their "pointless political disputes".

SZIJJÁRTÓ: PROTECTIVE MEASURES EXPECTED LONG TERM

All European Union members face similar challenges in connection with the novel coronavirus, and protective measures are expected to remain in place in the long term, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said. He told the first videoconference of EU foreign ministers that measures by member states to restrict border entry were fully legitimate. At the same time, it is commonly understood that freight transport must be maintained because this guarantees the continuity of supplies, he added. Despite this, tailbacks have formed on many borders because of lorry traffic, he said. "Common efforts will be needed to overcome this", he said.

Meanwhile, Szijjártó said it was "in vain to expect" EU coordination in efforts to bring back home the Hungarian citizens stuck abroad. This has been so far organised in line with

bilateral agreements and measures by individual member states, he said. Since 5pm on Sunday, an additional 726 Hungarian citizens have been transported back home this way, he said. On some occasions, other countries helped Hungarians travel back home, which is likely to happen again in the future, he said, adding that Hungary would act likewise. Many hundreds of thousands of EU citizens are stuck abroad and in many countries the restrictions make even travel to the airport difficult, he added. "A working team helping people return is on the job constantly," he said.

Szijjártó noted the EU wanted to launch another mission in the Mediterranean to combat the Libyan arms trade. Hungary, he added, agreed with this in principle but only if it did not turn into a rescue operation to bring in illegal migrants from north Africa. Szijjártó said the activities carried out under this scheme would be reviewed every four months. The approval of all member states will be necessary to carry on with it, which means Hungary has a veto, he added. "If we find that, similarly to earlier European missions, the operations in the Mediterranean result in the arrival of new migrants to Europe, then we will immediately force it to stop," he said.

He added that the situation on the Greek-Turkish border was also discussed. An earlier agreement signed by the EU and Turkey must be updated, or a new one signed,

in order to prevent Ankara from keeping the gates open to the European Union. "If it requires a new agreement to be signed, then we should do that," he said, adding that the EU had earlier promised 6 billion euros to Turkey to handle the refugee situation in the country. According to Ankara, the EU has so far transferred only 2.7 billion euros, while Brussels says 4.2 billion has been paid so far, he said. Szijjártó said it made no difference who was right because "neither sum is 6 billion". He asked the EU foreign affairs representative to clarify the issue, adding that it was still cheaper to pay 6 billion euros now than to allow "the dams to burst" on the Greek-Turkish border. "The wave of illegal migration is now not only a security or cultural threat but also a very serious health risk," he said, referring to the novel coronavirus.

MEP CALLS FOR END TO 'IRRESPONSIBLE' PROTESTS FROM OUTSIDE

Hungarian MEP József Szájer has called for an end to "irresponsible shouts of protest from the outside" in reaction to Czech MEP Radka Maxova's complaint sent to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen concerning Hungary's bill to extend the current state of emergency. Opinion website mandiner.hu reported that Maxova had asked Von der Leyen to take action because of the perceived

unconstitutionality of Hungary's bill. Szájer said in an entry published on mandiner.hu on Monday that Maxova's claim, according to which the bill would put the constitutional order of state under threat, was "nonsense". Szájer said several European countries were using extraordinary powers, each in line with their unique constitutional traditions.

HUNGARY CBANK SAYS LOAN REPAYMENTS MAY NOT RISE AFTER MORATORIUM

The National Bank of Hungary (NBH) has said lenders may not raise borrowers' instalments after a moratorium on repayments expires at year-end. Hungary's government recently declared a moratorium on payments of principal, interest and fees on all retail and corporate loans until the end of 2020. The measure is one of many rolled out to cushion the impact of novel coronavirus on the economy. The NBH noted that the moratorium would affect a total of 3,150 billion forints in principal payments and 450 billion in payments of interest and fees until the end of the year.

Meanwhile, the NBH started allowing counterparty banks to use loans to large companies as collateral in their transactions with the central bank, and it is applying a uniform 30% haircut on the loans accepted as collateral. The measure will raise

the stock of bank' assets eligible as collateral by 2,500 billion forints from 7,000 billion, the NBH said.

BILL WOULD EXPAND GOVT CONTROL OVER LOCAL COUNCIL-RUN THEATRES

The government has submitted to parliament a draft amendment to the law on theatres that would expand its control over state-funded theatres operated by local councils. The law approved last December created the conditions for the establishment of local council-run theatres, state theatres and theatres with a mixed operating structure. According to the official justification, the bill would serve to eliminate disparities in the operation of locally-run theatres whose annual operating budgets are funded entirely by the state by handing the minister in charge of culture basic employer rights over the head of the theatre.

Under the bill, the minister would have the authority to appoint

or dismiss a theatre's leaders, establish conflicts of interest, launch disciplinary proceedings and impose penalties. According to the justification, the transfer of the rights in question to the minister is consistent with Hungary's law on local councils, which allows for the heads of local council-run institutions to be appointed without the approval of the local government assembly.

POLISH PRESIDENT HIGHLIGHTS COMMON VALUES IN LETTER TO ÁDER

Marking the day of Polish-Hungarian friendship, Polish President Andrzej Duda highlighted in a letter to Hungarian President János Áder the common history and values that Poland and Hungary share.

Events marking this year's anniversary were to have been held in both countries, including in Csepel in Budapest, but had to be cancelled due to the novel coronavirus epidemic,

a statement said. Next year's events will be held in Bochnia, in southern Poland, it added.

NÉZŐPONT: VAST MAJORITY FOR EXTENDING STATE OF EMERGENCY

Fully 94% of respondents in a recent survey supported the government's proposal to extend the current state of emergency in view of the novel coronavirus epidemic, the Nézőpont Institute said, noting "unprecedented social support" for the government's firm actions.

HUNGARY SENDS AID TO EARTHQUAKE-HIT CROATIA

Hungary's disaster management authority has sent 200 folding beds and 200 mattresses in aid to earthquake-hit Croatia. The contingent is worth some 3.3 million forints (EUR 9,300), the authority's spokesman said.

