

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTV/Noémi Bruzák

Lonely jogger in deserted Budapest

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Coronavirus updates**

**Government session**

## TOP STORY

### GOVT TO 'FIND SOLUTION' TO EXPIRING MEASURES

The cabinet will convene on Wednesday to “resolve” problems arising from expiring measures issued under the state of emergency introduced due to the novel coronavirus epidemic, the head of the Prime Minister’s Office said.

Since the opposition on Monday refused to debate extending special measures in an extraordinary session of parliament, this can be debated only next Tuesday at the earliest, Gergely Gulyás told a press conference. The government now “has to mitigate the damage caused by the opposition,” he said. Among the measures expiring this Friday is the decision to close Hungary’s borders to vehicles arriving from certain countries, Gulyás said. The closure of universities and the ban for health-care workers, soldiers and government officials to leave Hungary also expires on Friday, he added. Meanwhile, the decision to suspend court trials and the authorisation of mayors to order the closure of kindergartens and nurseries expire on Monday, he added.

Asked to comment on rumours about the response bill circulating in the media, Gulyás insisted that no one would be penalized for criticising the government or its handling of the epidemic. Only false claims meant to incite fear would be punishable, the PM’s Office chief said.

## **HUNGARY RECORDS 9 COVID-19 DEATHS SO FAR**

The number of deaths due to novel coronavirus in Hungary grew to nine on Tuesday morning, koronavirus.gov.hu said. The epidemic in Hungary is at the stage of group infections spread in communities, the website said. Infected people can be found everywhere in the country and anyone could be already infected, it added. Of the 187 confirmed cases in Hungary, 10 are Iranian, 2 are British, one is Kazakh, another Vietnamese, and the remaining 173 are Hungarian, the website said. A total of 21 people have been confirmed as having recovered from the virus, while nine have died. Fully 92 are in quarantine and a total of 6,113 test samples have been taken, it added.

## **CONSIGNMENT OF PROTECTIVE GEAR ARRIVES FROM CHINA**

A consignment of protective gear in connection with novel coronavirus has arrived from China, the prime minister said. The delivery contains 3 million face masks, 100,000 tests and 86 ventilators, Viktor Orbán said. Consignments from China are being delivered to Hungary regularly, with around ten plane loads expected altogether in the upcoming period.

## **GULYÁS ACCUSES OPPOSITION OF 'SPREADING LIES' ABOUT EPIDEMIC RESPONSE BILL**

Gergely Gulyás, the head of the Prime Minister's Office, said that going by the opposition's "behaviour" in parliament on Monday, there was reason to believe that they were making a push to "spread lies" about the government's epidemic response bill on the international stage. Addressing a press conference, Gulyás slammed as "falsehood" the claim that the government's decision not to set a time limit for maintaining the state of emergency would lead to a delay in holding elections, noting that the timetable for holding general and local elections is regulated by the constitution.

It is up to the government to determine the duration of the state of emergency, Gulyás said, adding, at the same time, that the bill's sponsors had proposed that parliament should be the one to decide how long it should be maintained for. This, he said, limited, rather than expanded, the powers of the cabinet. In response to a question, he said the government had no way of extending earlier resolutions online. But if it did, he said, then Anett Bósz, a member of the opposition Democratic Coalition's group, who had been the first to suggest such a solution, "would be the one screaming the loudest".

## **CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER: DEDICATED UNITS TO BE SET UP FOR ACUTE RESPIRATORY PATIENTS IN PRIMARY CARE**

Dedicated units are being set up at the level of primary care for patients suffering from acute respiratory symptoms, the chief medical officer said. Separate units will operate for all other patients so they can be physically separated from those with respiratory problems, Cecilia Müller told an online press conference of the operative board in charge of coordinating tasks during the novel coronavirus epidemic. The new units are planned to be introduced within a week, and the measure serves to reduce contact between doctors and patients, as well as between patients, she added.

Müller said the ninth death caused by coronavirus has been a younger woman who had suffered from several chronic diseases, including heart and circulation problems and various metabolic disorders.

In response to a question about whether the deceased in Hungary were getting tested for coronavirus, she said they were not. The human resources minister has ordered the suspension of post-mortems in cases where the cause of death is known, she said. On rare occasions it is uncertain whether the deceased had been a coronavirus victim, she said. If this is suspected, then testing can be done

within a short period after the time of death, she added.

Commenting on the rate of spread of the virus, she said Hungary was in a lucky position because several timely measures had been introduced. At the same time, she declined to make projections about the length of the epidemic, adding that mathematical models were in the making. She also said that pregnancy was not among the risk factors for coronavirus. But the virus can change how the immune system works, she added, and recommended that pregnant women avoid meetings and see to personal hygiene. She said all hospitals were well prepared to receive patients, and capacity is being expanded. Intensive care capacity is planned to be tripled, she added.

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### **OPERATIVE BOARD: NUMBER OF QUARANTINE DODGERS GROWS**

The number of people breaching quarantine regulations is growing, the operative board said. Tibor Lakatos, the head of the operative board's emergency centre, told a press conference that the authorities have ordered home quarantine in 4,207 cases so far. Altogether 177 irregularities have been recorded, he said. The authorities have fined 24 people and filed misdemeanor charges against 130, he said. Those who have been exposed to the risk of infection, having recently returned from abroad or for other

reasons, may carry the virus without showing symptoms, Lakatos noted. They may pass the virus on to people for whom it may be life-threatening, he said.

Hospitals received protective gear for intensive care workers by early Tuesday morning, he said. Protective equipment is being continuously supplied to those who may come in direct contact with virus-carriers through their work, he said. The protection of health-care workers, policemen, disaster management staff and others participating in the epidemic relief efforts is a priority, Lakatos said.

Regarding the work of operative groups at strategic companies, Lakatos said the groups are reporting any operational problems to avoid supply interruptions. Further, companies may be involved in taking measures if necessary, Lakatos said. Lakatos also warned that a growing number of people are trying to exploit the epidemic to defraud others. The police have taken action in connection with 16 cases of scaremongering, 14 instances of fraud and 13 cases of endangering the public, he said. Shops are being monitored to ensure they observe shortened opening times, Lakatos said. Hungary's border crossings are currently operating seamlessly, mostly without congestion, he said. Regional epidemic response committees have started working in all Hungarian counties, coordinating protection efforts locally, Lakatos said.

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### **SZIJJÁRTÓ: LOT TO TAKE HUNGARIANS HOME**

Hungarian nationals still stranded in other countries because of the coronavirus measures will be flown to Budapest by Polish airline LOT, the foreign minister said on Facebook. Péter Szijjártó consulted with his Polish counterpart Jacek Czaputowicz by phone. The two ministers agreed that Hungary and Poland will closely cooperate in helping Hungarians to return from Asia and North America to Budapest with LOT in the coming days and weeks.

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### **GOVT SUSPENDS ENFORCEMENTS, EVICTIONS**

The government is suspending enforcement orders and evictions during the state of emergency connected to the novel coronavirus epidemic, but these will continue to be carried out once the state of emergency expires, according to a government decree. The state of emergency lasts for 15 days, after which parliament's approval is needed for an extension.

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### **SZIJJÁRTÓ WELCOMES START OF ALBANIA, NORTH MACEDONIA EU ACCESSION TALKS**

Hungary welcomes the start of Albania and North Macedonia's accession talks to the European Union,

and is proud to have had an active role in this achievement, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said. Briefing the press after an EU's General Affairs Council (GAC) video conference, Szijjártó welcomed the member states' agreement on starting the talks, calling it a "huge success for Hungary". Hungary has supported the EU's enlargement for several years, and provided "real, concrete" help to Western Balkan states in the accession process, Szijjártó said. He also noted that the EU's commissioner responsible for enlargement, Hungary's Olivér Várhelyi, had proposed a new enlargement method to expedite the process. The GAC has now expressed political support for that method, Szijjártó said.

Hungary has long seen Albania and North Macedonia as ready to start the accession process, he said. The EU has a vested interest in the two countries joining at a time when the bloc "badly needs a success story", he said, referring to Brexit, migration pressure on the southern borders and the coronavirus epidemic. The EU's economic and security interests also warrant an enlargement in the Western Balkans, Szijjártó said. Accession talks with Serbia and Montenegro should not be stalled either, Szijjártó warned.

Asked about the new coronavirus epidemic, Szijjártó said the situation poses a "significant economic challenge to the world and Hungary". The Hungarian government has taken steps to take advantage of the

EU's laxer regulations for supporting investment projects and companies to save the jobs created over the past years, he said. The most flexible and fastest reacting governments will enjoy a great competitive advantage after the epidemic, he said.

**KOVÁCS: OPPOSITION STYMIES GOVT PROTECTION EFFORTS**

The opposition stymied the government's protection efforts against the novel coronavirus by refusing to debate extending special measures in an extraordinary session of parliament, Zoltán Kovács, the state secretary for international communications and relations, said in a video.

The lawmakers of Jobbik, the Socialist Party, the Democratic Coalition, LMP and Párbeszéd on Monday voted against the bill arguing that it fails to set a time limit for maintaining the state of emergency.

Their move worked against "the command of cooperation" required in a situation like this, Kovács said. The state secretary noted that some measures including the decision to close Hungary's borders to vehicles arriving from certain countries and the closure of kindergartens and nurseries would expire before Parliament would have a chance to extend them next Tuesday. "The opposition is causing chaos because these measures will need to be adopted again," he said.

**OPPOSITION VOWS TO DENY 'LIMITLESS POWERS' FROM ORBÁN GOVERNMENT**

As the opposition does not trust Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government, it will not grant it special powers for an indefinite period of time, the opposition parties said. The opposition on Monday voted against the government's epidemic response bill because the legislation failed to set a time limit for maintaining the state of emergency. In a joint statement, the Democratic Coalition (DK), the Socialists, Párbeszéd, Jobbik, green LMP, Momentum and the Liberals, along with independent lawmakers Bernadett Szél and Ákos Hadházy, called Orbán's government "unfit" to handle the crisis. "The government sees Hungarians and their elected representatives as adversaries to overcome rather than partners," they said. The opposition, in turn, sees a need for acting, planning and making decisions together. The government, however, denies millions of Hungarians and their representatives to do so, they said.

**KARÁCSONY TAKES OVER MUNICIPAL ASSEMBLY TASKS AND COMPETENCIES**

During the state of emergency introduced in response to the new coronavirus epidemic, Mayor Gergely



Karácsony will take over the tasks and competencies of the Budapest municipal assembly, the municipal website [budapest.hu](http://budapest.hu) said. Karácsony has not convened the assembly for its regular March session, citing the state of emergency and a risk of infection to the councillors, the website said. To ensure transparency, Karácsony said he would consult with the party group leaders before making decisions on issues that would have been on the body's agenda.

Zsolt Láng, group leader of ruling Fidesz in the municipal assembly, said that Karácsony has assumed tasks and competencies as required by law in an emergency situation, expressing hope that it would not serve "either political or PR purposes". He said that upon Karácsony's initiative they would be ready to consult with the mayor about planned measures. "In an emergency, such as the current pandemic, it is just natural that elected leaders and experts are given authority to operate the state and protection effectively. This is the attitude we would have expected from opposition politicians in parliament," Láng said.

Meanwhile, Karácsony decided to allocate 1 billion forints (EUR 2.8m) to cover the cost of coronavirus-related emergency measures, the website said.

**CONTACTLESS CARD PAYMENT WITHOUT PIN TO BE RAISED TO HUF 15,000**

The amount that can be paid in shops using contactless bank cards without

the need to type in a pin number will be raised from 5,000 forints to 15,000 in the interest of minimising physical contact during the virus epidemic, the finance ministry said. The ministry is also considering other possible measures to increase non-cash payments and to minimise physical contact during payments, it said in a statement. Almost 90% of purchases using contactless bank cards are expected to be made without the need to touch the POS terminal from April 15. But in the interest of security, pin numbers will be required periodically. After 5 purchases without a pin, the code will be required for the sixth purchase. Payments with a smartphone are also encouraged as no pin entry is required at all, the ministry noted.

**DK CALLS ON GOVT TO PUBLISH NUMBER OF PEOPLE TESTED**

The opposition Democratic Coalition (DK) has called on the government to make public the number of people already tested for novel coronavirus. "At least two tests on the same person" are needed for a reliable result, DK's spokesman Balázs Barkóczi told a press conference. The general practice worldwide is to present statistics based on the number of people tested so far in a particular region rather than the number of tests carried out in a lab, he said. The Hungarian government's official website, [koronavirus.gov.hu](http://koronavirus.gov.hu),

publishes the number of samples tested in accredited labs and not, as is customary around the world, the number of people tested, he added. Barkóczi called it "outrageous" that, with "scandalously few tests" taken, the government is "doctoring numbers" and "spreading disinformation".

**POLICY MAKERS KEEP BASE RATE, O/N DEPOSIT RATE ON HOLD**

Hungarian rate-setters kept the central bank base rate on hold at 0.90% and the O/N deposit rate at -0.05% at a monthly policy meeting. The Council has left the rates unchanged since a policy meeting last March; however, they have tweaked monetary policy on a quarterly basis -- coinciding with the publication of the central bank's Inflation Report -- by adjusting the amount of liquidity to be crowded out from central bank instruments that pay the base rate.

The central bank will publish its latest Inflation Report on Thursday, but it released the main forecasts from the report on Tuesday. It lowered the forecast for 2020 inflation to 2.6% -2.8% from 3.5% in the previous Inflation Report released in December. The central bank explained that the forecast is a range because it is based on two equally weighted scenarios rather than a preferential baseline scenario due to the uncertain economic prospects resulting from the coronavirus pandemic.

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The bank sees inflation climbing back to 3.4-3.5% in 2021. Hungary's CPI was 4.4 % in February. The bank put GDP growth this year at 2.0-3.0%, down from 3.7% in the previous report. It sees growth snapping back to 4.0-4.8% in 2021, lifted by the low base and a rebound.

"This year's macroeconomic data are expected to show significant volatility and dichotomy. In the first half of 2020, growth is likely to slow significantly, reflecting the negative economic effects of the pandemic; then domestic growth, the labour market, lending and foreign trade are expected to pick up again as the negative effects wane and lost economic activity is regained," the central bank said.

**POPULATION DECLINE SLOWS IN JAN 2020**

Hungary's population decline slowed by 47% in January 2020 after 9.4% more births and 17% fewer deaths were registered compared with the same period last year, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. The number of marriages almost doubled, with 2,863 couples tying the knot, compared with the same period last year, and the highest January number since 1982. In the first month of the year, 8,067 children were born, 694 more than in the same period last

year, while 11,553 people died, 2,356 fewer than in January 2019. The rate of natural population decline dropped to 0.42% from 0.79% in January 2019, KSH said.

**CORONAVIRUS - WIZZ AIR GROUNDS 85% OF FLEET**

Hungarian low-cost carrier Wizz Air has grounded around 85% of its fleet due to travel restrictions introduced by governments to contain the spread of novel coronavirus, the airline said. "The company continues to operate 15% of its capacity and remains operational in Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria, but the grounding of the entire fleet remains a distinct possibility over the next period, as potential additional travel restrictions and social distancing policies issued by authorities may make international flying for commercial purposes either untenable or impossible," Wizz Air said in an update for investors. "Given the significant balance sheet strength and liquidity, as well as the company's ultra-low cost business model, Wizz Air is confident in its ability to survive even a potential prolonged grounding substantially beyond the current estimates for the impact of COVID-19 in Europe," it added.

**GOVT OFFICIAL WELCOMES DECISION TO POSTPONE TOKYO OLYMPIC GAMES**

Hungary's state secretary for sports has welcomed Japan and the International Olympic Committee's decision to postpone the 2020 Tokyo Olympics due to the novel coronavirus pandemic, saying that safety and health must come first. In a Facebook entry, Tünde Szabó said that though Hungary had been hopeful until the end that the Olympics would go ahead, she was certain that the decision made by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and IOC president Thomas Bach to delay the event until 2021 was "prudent and right".

IOC member Pál Schmitt, honorary president of the Hungarian Olympic Committee and Hungary's former president, regretted that the event had to be postponed, but welcomed that it would be organized at a later date. "I, like all the Olympic athletes and sports leaders who were doing their best to be ready for the July 24 opening, regretted hearing the news [of the event's postponement]," Schmitt told public news channel M1. "But this decision was made at such a high level and with such consensus that all of us have to respect it."

