

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTV/Tamás Kovács

Deserted street in downtown Budapest

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

Central bank online presser on March 2020 inflation report

TOP STORY

ARMY TEAMS DESPATCHED TO MORE STRATEGIC FIRMS

Army teams are being deployed to help 84 strategic companies in connection with novel coronavirus, a defence ministry official said.

The teams have been despatched to 71 companies, vital in producing oxygen and supplying food, Romulusz Ruszin, the head of the defence minister's secretariat, told an online press conference of the operative board in charge of epidemic response. The most important aspect when selecting which companies to deploy the teams to the companies in question was ensuring continued supplies to the public, he added.

Meanwhile, the defence ministry said that the additional 13 companies are in the telecom, food, pharmaceutical and gas supply sectors. They include Magyar Telekom, food retailers Tesco-Global, CBA, Spar and Coop, drug makers Egis, Sanofi, Richter and TEVA, and gas companies. It noted the March 13 decision to establish army teams were part of government measures to combat the epidemic. Among their duties is to provide security for these companies, the ministry said in a statement. Defence Minister Tibor Benkő announced on March 19 that the military would send "steering forces" to work with the country's strategic companies.

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BRITISH DIPLOMAT DIES OF CORONAVIRUS IN HUNGARY

Britain's deputy ambassador to Hungary has been the tenth victim of the novel coronavirus in the country, the British embassy said confirming press reports. Steven Dick was aged 37 and died in Budapest on Tuesday, bringing the number of victims to ten.

The number of people confirmed to be infected has grown to 226, koronavirus.gov.hu said. Of the 226 confirmed cases, 10 are Iranian, 2 are British, one is Kazakh, another Vietnamese, and the remaining 212 are Hungarian, it said. The epidemic in Hungary is at the stage of transmissions in communities, the website said. Infected people can be found all over the country and anyone could be already infected, it added.

OPERATIONAL BOARD: BUILDING OF CONTAINER HOSPITAL PROGRESSING WELL

The construction of a container hospital in Kiskunhalas, in southern Hungary, is progressing well, and ventilators have been installed, the head of operative board in charge of handling the novel coronavirus, said. Tibor Lakatos noted at an online press conference that the government has earmarked another 15 billion forints (EUR 43m) for the purchase of equipment so that operational staff

members can continue working with the appropriate protections in place. He also announced a new 330-bed temporary hospital at Budapest's Hungexpo grounds. This, he added, can be expanded according to need. He stressed that these temporary facilities are stand-by, and will only be used if normal hospital capacity proves insufficient. Procurement of ventilators, surgical masks and special protective gear is ongoing, Lakatos said, adding that Hungarian producers are ready to ramp up their supply of disinfectants to hospitals, which are continuously expanding the capacities of their ICUs. Once more ventilators start coming in, they will be able to provide more ICU beds, he said.

As regards the issue of some mayors having ordered curfews in their respective municipalities, Lakatos said the competent government commissioners would file complaints over the orders. The government has said that it has sole competency over issuing restrictive measures. He said the operative board had reviewed the restrictions put in place by Italy, Austria and Hungary and found that the border restrictions and quarantine ordered by Austria and Hungary have proven effective. The measures have helped slow the spread of the virus, allowing Hungary to prepare for the epidemic when it reaches the stage of mass infections, Lakatos said. Hungary's border crossings are currently operating seamlessly, with minor congestions at the Hungary-Serbia border at Roszke

and the Hungary-Romania border at Csanádpalota and Ártánd, he said.

Concerning quarantine violations, Lakatos said the authorities have issued warnings to two people, fined 26, and filed misdemeanour charges against 157. Those violating the rules face fines of up to 150,000 forints, he said.

Cecilia Müller, the chief medical officer, told the same press conference that so far 226 people have been confirmed as testing positive for the virus in Hungary. Ten people have died from it, she said, noting that they had all suffered from chronic diseases. So far, 21 people have recovered from the virus and a total of 6,817 samples have been tested. Currently there are six patients requiring intensive care, she said. In response to a question, Müller said coronavirus tests are carried out in line with the guidelines of the World Health Organisation (WHO), adding that suspicious cases require two tests to be carried out.

GOVT ALLOCATES ADDITIONAL HUF 15 BN FOR MEDICAL EQUIPMENT

The government has earmarked more than 15 billion forints (EUR 43m) for the purchase of additional medical equipment as part of protection measures against the novel coronavirus epidemic in Hungary.

The amount will be used by the State Health-Care Supply Centre (ÁEEK) for the purchase and distribution of stocks under the supervision of the operative board in charge of coordinating

measures in connection with the virus, according to a decree published in Magyar Közlöny, the government gazette, on Tuesday.

TENT HOSPITAL SET UP IN BUDAPEST

The army has built a tent hospital in a single day in the courtyard of Budapest's St. László Hospital, Ferenc Korom, the commander of the Hungarian Armed Forces, said in an interview to public television.

The state-of-the-art tent system has been set up to flexibly adapt to the task at hand, according to the army's website honvedelem.hu.

In the current epidemic phase, the tent will be used to pre-screen patients so that patients can be assigned to the best possible care within the shortest possible time.

The tent system can withstand winds of up to 100kms per hour and it contains a rapid cooling and heating system, the website said.

HUNGARY, ROMANIA TO REOPEN BORDER TO COMMUTERS

Hungary and Romania will reopen their shared border to commuters, the foreign minister said. Like many other European countries, Hungary recently restricted traffic across its borders in an effort to slow the spread of novel coronavirus, Péter Szijjártó told MTI.

However, many of those living along the Hungarian-Romanian border

commute to the other country on a daily basis for work, Szijjártó said. "And besides protecting people's health, our job is also to do our best to keep the economy going," he added.

Szijjártó said he and his Romanian counterpart have agreed that the policy will apply to Hungarians and Romanians living within a 30km radius of the border.

The two countries' police chiefs will now decide which border stations will be open to commuters as well as the timeframe, the minister said.

Keeping the border open to commuters is in the interest of ethnic Hungarians in Romania, as well as Hungarian and Romanian businesses, Szijjártó said.

In a Facebook post, Szijjártó said that the crossing facilities at Létavértes, Nyirábrány and Méhkerék would reopen.

"This is how it goes when we realise our mutual interests. We could do that in connection with other causes, too," Szijjártó added in his entry.

FIDESZ MEPS APPEAL TO EP PRESIDENT OVER LIBE'S HUNGARY CONCERN

MEPs of Hungary's ruling Fidesz party have sent a letter to European Parliament President David Sassoli, complaining about a press release by the EP's LIBE Committee stating worries over Hungary's measures tackling the novel coronavirus epidemic.

In the press release, Fernando Lopez Aguilar, the head of the Committee

on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, expressed concerns about the Hungarian government's epidemic response proposals.

In the letter published on the Fidesz group's website, the group called it "outrageous that in midst of a deadly Coronavirus pandemics, which threatens the life of millions of Europeans, an EP committee instead of investing its time and intellectual capacities in finding ways of prevention and protection of citizens is engaging itself in a mean party political battling based on lies".

The letter signed by Tamás Deutsch said that the MEPs fully agree that democratic values and principles must be protected, even in times of a crisis. But, it added, it was equally important to respect the principle of equal and fair treatment. "If LIBE decides to analyse the compliance of emergency measures against EU law, they should do it in all Member States, without singling out one," they said.

They said that the government's bill submitted to parliament on extending the state of emergency fully respects the rule of law and serves no other purpose than to protect human lives. The procedure followed by parliament is in full compliance with the rules that apply under Hungary's constitution in the instance of an emergency, the MEPs said. "We find therefore LIBE's proceeding unacceptable and irresponsible, and we expect you as President of the House to raise your voice against it," the MEPs said in their letter.

OPPOSITION MPS CALL FOR DEFENCE CTTEE TO BE BRIEFED ON ARMY DEPLOYMENTS

Opposition Democratic Coalition (DK), Jobbik and Socialist MPs have called for parliament's defence and law enforcement committee to be briefed on army deployments to the country's streets and strategic companies in connection with novel coronavirus.

Ágnes Vadai (DK), Andrea Varga-Damm (Jobbik) and Tamás Harangozó (Socialists) said in a joint statement that they demand to know who ordered army soldiers to patrol the streets and the exact reason for doing so.

The lawmakers said they also want to know why army groups have been deployed to major companies.

DK: CABINET MEETING MEANT TO DISCREDIT OPPOSITION

The opposition Democratic Coalition (DK) has accused the government of using Wednesday's cabinet meeting to try to discredit the opposition parties rather than to focus on its response to the novel coronavirus epidemic.

In an online press conference, DK managing director Csaba Molnár branded the government's statement that it would meet on Wednesday because the opposition had blocked the extension of the state of emergency in parliament on Monday as a "lie".

Even if it wanted to, the opposition could not stop the government from declaring a state of emergency or extending it, Molnár said. The government's right to declare a state of emergency is enshrined in the constitution, and only an absolute majority is needed in parliament to extend it, he said.

Molnár said the opposition's concerns about the government's actions were not about the state of emergency but its epidemic response bill. He insisted that the real aim of the government bill, requiring a two-thirds majority to pass, was to grant it "absolute powers until the end of time".

He said that "instead of trying to discredit the opposition", the government should use Wednesday's meeting to focus on the shortage of protective equipment at hospitals, the reach of its economic measures and the fact that Hungary is the country "doing almost the least number of tests" for the coronavirus in Europe.

SOCIALISTS CALL ON GOV'T TO FOCUS ON PEOPLE'S HEALTH INSTEAD OF 'POLITICAL GAMES'

The opposition Socialists called on ruling Fidesz and the government to focus on protecting people's health and stop "playing political games".

Referring to Monday's vote in parliament where the opposition refused to debate extending special measures in an extraordinary session, MP Ágnes Kunhalmi said the Socialists

rejected the bill on granting special powers to the government because it failed to contain a time limit.

She said that carrying out screenings, buying protective gear and protecting employees and businesses did not require regulations that need two-thirds majority support in parliament.

The government decrees issued during the state of emergency could be approved by parliament with a simple majority but Fidesz still asks for powers that are not needed for handling the epidemic, Kunhalmi said in a video posted on Facebook.

The opposition would have supported the government bill on protective measures against the coronavirus if it had included a time limit and allowed holding parliament sessions in electronic form, she said.

The opposition's distrust in the government results from its policies over the past ten years, including the repeated extension of a state of crisis caused by mass migration even in the absence of the conditions warranting such a move, Kunhalmi said.

The opposition fears that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán will maintain the state of emergency for years on the grounds that the epidemic's economic consequences need to be tackled, she added.

KARÁCSONY VOWS TO ONLY ENACT MEASURES BACKED BY ASSEMBLY

Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony has promised that he will only enact

measures during the state of emergency introduced as a response to the new coronavirus epidemic that are backed by the majority of city councillors.

The municipal website budapest.hu on Tuesday said Karácsony will take over the tasks and competencies of the Budapest municipal assembly.

"It's not that I want absolute powers, but rather that the laws impose on me the duty to make decisions in the name of the municipal assembly during a state of emergency," Karácsony said in a video posted on his Facebook page. "This is a situation that one must act on but must not abuse."

GOVT BANS EXPORT OF DRUG INGREDIENT

The government has banned the export of a drug ingredient used for treating novel coronavirus patients, the government information centre said.

Under a new government decree, exports of the active ingredient hydroxychloroquine-sulfate and drugs or intermediary products containing it will be prohibited.

The active ingredient is used in the production of drugs that are also used for treating novel coronavirus patients in several countries, it added.

"Hungary is one of the largest exporters of this active ingredient globally but now it should give priority to protecting the Hungarian public and securing drug supplies," it said.

MOL SWITCHES W HUNGARY PLANT TO SANITISER PRODUCTION

Hungarian oil and gas company MOL has repurposed its lubricants unit MOL Lub to make sanitiser in support of measures against novel coronavirus.

MOL said in a statement that in the space of two weeks it had repurposed a production line which earlier made wind shield cleaner fluid to make hand and surface sanitisers. The plant in Almásfüzitő, in western Hungary, produces around 50,000 litres of sanitiser a day in three shifts. MOL Lub has already made its first deliveries to hospitals, waste managers, public utilities and

municipalities, and is working to launch retail sales of the product as soon as possible. MOL will also start making sanitiser products at its plants in Slovakia and Croatia, they added.

BARELY 5% OF HUNGARY HOTELS OPEN, SAYS TOURISM AGENCY

Around 95% of hotels in Hungary are closed this week as a consequence of continued cancellations of bookings and new ones drying up due to the novel coronavirus outbreak, the Hungarian Tourism Agency (MTU) said.

Hotel occupancy rates have dropped from 70% in the first week of March to 35% by the middle of the month, NTU said. The average occupancy rate in mid-March was 11% in Budapest and 15% outside the capital.

Budapest's tourism sector was hit harder by the epidemic than the rest of the country, the agency said, noting that most of the city's tourists are foreigners.

