

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Tamás Kovács

Special epidemic action unit to investigate coronavirus clusters

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

TOP STORY

PM URGES SELF-ISOLATION WITH VIRUS SYMPTOMS

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in a radio interview urged those displaying symptoms of Covid-19 to self-isolate, adding that no form of defence against the virus can succeed without voluntary participation from the public.

Orbán told public broadcaster Kossuth Rádió that it was primarily “a country’s level of intelligence, rather than measures enacted by the government” that determined the quality of the country’s response to the virus. Recent coronavirus clusters identified in Pápa, western Hungary, and Mezőkövesd in the northeast emerged because people with coughs and fevers went to places where many others gathered, the prime minister said.

The operative board coordinating Hungary’s response to the epidemic is constantly at work and soon the special unit investigating coronavirus clusters will be seen isolating any groups that may be infected, Orbán said. The prime minister underlined the importance of the government’s National Consultation survey launched in connection with the novel coronavirus epidemic and rebooting the economy, saying it would help the government enact measures that are supported by the people. So far, more than 1.4 million people have filled out the survey, Orbán said, adding that this was “a very high number” considering how many people go on holiday this time of year.

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ORBÁN: ILLEGAL MIGRANTS POSE HEALTH RISK

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said all illegal migrants attempting to enter Hungary pose health and “biological” risks which is to be averted “at all cost”. It would be wrong to “paint all migrants as biological bombs” by conflating migration and the novel coronavirus epidemic, Orbán said in an interview with public broadcaster Kossuth Rádió. However, “some are exactly that”, he added. Until those carrying the virus can be identified, all illegal entrants should be treated as potential sources of infection, he said. “This is too strong a statement for social justice warriors ... but Hungarians have to think about self-defence,” he said. Orbán said he had asked the interior minister to make sure the armed forces and police continue to take forceful action against all attempts of illegal entry as it now poses health risks, too.

Regarding the pop music industry, to which the government recently allocated 2.12 billion forints (EUR 6.1m) to offset the losses incurred during the epidemic, Orbán said he saw the sector as a part of Hungarian culture. The funds should be decided upon by “people from that world” to avoid dissatisfaction despite government support, he said.

On employment in Hungary, Orbán said the number of jobholders currently fell short

of the pre-pandemic period by 30,000 to 35,000. “If all goes well”, the number of those in employment may be back to pre-pandemic levels by autumn, he said, adding that the aim was to top those figures. Fidesz won the first of its three consecutive election victories in 2010 by promising one million jobs, Orbán noted. In eight or nine years, over 800,000 jobs have been created which is “a world record”, he said. Families’ livelihoods should be based on work and not benefits, he said. “We went bust under leftist governments because they encouraged and enabled” an approach counting on unemployment and other benefits by the jobless, he said.

Meanwhile, he said that hopefully the world would handle a likely second wave of the pandemic “in a more organised manner” than it had the first one when “countries would grapple for protective equipment at various Asian airports”.

Hungary has made the necessary changes to its health-care sector that give it a better chance of putting up “a near perfect defence against the pandemic” in the event of a second wave, Orbán said, adding that he had instructed the minister responsible for health care to give a precise professional opinion on the first coronavirus vaccine to be put in use. Hungary has already “posted an order with the EU” for 5 million doses of a coronavirus vaccine when it is developed, he said.

Orbán urged the public to be “responsible” with their days off from work. He said the government had “set a good example” by cancelling the fireworks for the August 20 national holiday as it would have posed “a risk we couldn’t take”. The prime minister asked those travelling abroad to favour neighbouring countries of which Slovakia, Austria, Slovenia and Croatia are currently considered safe in terms of the status of the epidemic there.

EPIDEMIC ACTION UNIT TO ISOLATE CLUSTERS

A special epidemic action unit investigating coronavirus clusters will be isolating any groups that may be infected in order to prevent the virus from spreading further, a spokesman for the operative board coordinating Hungary’s response to the novel coronavirus epidemic said. The first phase of protection against the epidemic has been successfully completed but the threat of the epidemic has not been eliminated and that’s why a new special epidemic action unit has been set up, Róbert Kiss said. The unit will be tasked with coordinating the work of cooperating authorities including the army, the disaster management authority, the medical officer service and the ambulance services and to ensure that resources are used most efficiently, he added. The unit will have the authority to order restrictive measures, he said. Department head

of the national disaster management directorate Péter Jackovics said a mobile lab operated by the disaster management authority will be made available to the new unit. Medical director of the national ambulance service György Pápai said they had been involved in screening travellers at border crossings ever since the start of the epidemic and had taken 60,000 samples from members of the public. The ambulance services are also involved in transporting patients suspected of carrying the virus.

Head of the state medical services centre AEEK Enikő Haláchy said the organisation was tasked with supplying protective gear for health sector workers, the police, the army and to elderly homes. Pál Szabó, a spokesman for the national hospital chief command support unit, said that 92 hospital commanders were helping anti-epidemic efforts around Hungary. Additionally, 19 commanders started work in elderly homes with over 200 residents at the end of April, tasked with protecting medical stocks and monitoring compliance with anti-epidemic regulations. János Miklovich, the head of the army's chemical protection unit, said the unit was tasked with protection against chemical, biological and nuclear weapons and was therefore equipped with tools that could be effectively used in anti-epidemic operations. Its disinfection teams can be deployed at any location and at any time, he added.

TWO DEATHS, 24 NEW CORONAVIRUS INFECTIONS IN HUNGARY

Two elderly Covid-19 patients, suffering from underlying illnesses, have died and the number of registered coronavirus infections in Hungary has increased by 24 to 4,621 over the past 24 hours, koronavirus.gov.hu said on Friday morning. The number of fatalities increased to 602, while 3,464 people have made a recovery. There are 55 active infections and 72 coronavirus patients are being treated in hospital for Covid-19, six on ventilators. Fully 7,092 people are in official home quarantine, while the number of tests carried out stands at 355,467. New restrictions on entering the country came into force on July 12, with the aim of preventing the import of infections from abroad. Foreign countries have been classed into three categories: red, yellow, green. The authorities are screening arrivals and taking action based on the severity of the infection rate in each country. This can include ordering home quarantine for 14 days and compulsory testing. The government and the chief medical officer review the classification of the countries on a weekly basis. To avoid a flare-up of the epidemic, the government has cancelled the celebrations that draw large crowds on the August 20 national holiday, including the fireworks and the air show. The ban on gatherings of more than 500 people has been

extended beyond August 15. Most infections have been registered in Budapest (2,074), followed by Pest County (695) and the counties of Fejér (379), Komárom-Esztergom (315) and Zala (265). Békés County has the fewest infections (18).

DEBRECEN MEDICAL, RESCUE TEAM LEAVES FOR BEIRUT

A special medical and rescue team of Debrecen University left for Beirut, the university said. In cooperation with the foreign ministry, the team headed by András Késmárky is taking bandages, medicine, ventilators, medical diagnostics devices and other medical supplies to the area affected by Tuesday's devastating explosions, the statement said. The Hungarian team is expected to assist in rescue operations until next Thursday, it added.

KARÁCSONY: BUDAPEST TRANSPORT AUTHORITY BOOKS HUF 4.7 BN LOSS IN 2019

Budapest public transport authority BKK booked a 4.7 billion forint (EUR 13.6m) loss in 2019 due in large part to "the failed launch" of the electronic ticketing system which cost the company 6.1 billion forints, Gergely Karácsony, the city's mayor, said. In a Facebook entry, Karácsony said the Budapest city council will look into the reasons behind BKK's losses, insisting

that someone would have to take responsibility for “Budapest’s biggest scandal of the last several years”. BKK’s new leadership, an investigative committee and the authorities are investigating criminal liability for the company’s financial situation, he said, also underlining the political responsibility of the previous Budapest leadership. The authorities are working to identify those who benefitted from the misuse of taxpayer money, he said. Karácsony said 2019 was the first year that BKK had booked a loss. “There’s no ticketing system in place and there are billions of forints missing,” he said. “Though we’re not starting from zero, we’re at a considerable disadvantage,” the mayor said, vowing to introduce an electronic ticketing system in Budapest before the end of his term.

TRADE VOLUME CONTINUES TO RECOVER IN JUNE

The fall in Hungary’s exports and imports continued to slow in June, recovering from a lockdown plunge in April, preliminary data released by the Central Statistical Office (KSH) show. Exports fell by 3.1% to 8.5 billion euros and imports dropped by 5.7% to 7.9 billion euros. The trade surplus came to 697 million, growing by 201 million euros from the same month a year earlier. Trade with other European Union member states accounted for about 78% of exports and 68% of imports. In April, while restrictions were in place to contain

the spread of the novel coronavirus, exports fell by over 37% and imports dropped by over 29%. The country also registered a rare trade deficit for the month, in part because of imports of personal protective equipment and ventilators. The decline in trade volume moderated in May, when exports fell by 29% and imports dropped by 26%, and the trade balance returned to positive.

BUDGET DEFICIT REACHES HUF 2,165 BN AT END-JULY

Hungary’s budget deficit, excluding local councils, reached 2,165 billion forints (EUR 6.3bn) at the end of July, widened by pandemic defence spending, economic stimulus and pre-financing for European Union-funded projects, the finance ministry said in a preliminary release of data. The central budget ran a 1,841.4 billion forint deficit and the social insurance funds were 336.3 billion in the red, while separate state funds had a 12.7 billion surplus. The ministry said spending on pandemic defence, such as acquisitions of personal protective equipment and ventilators, came to more than 520 billion forints by the end of July. It said that payouts for EU-funded projects approached 1,274.9 billion forints by the end of July, while transfers from Brussels came to just 489.5 billion. The government has been pre-financing EU-funded projects for years to avoid backups and ensure all available monies are used up. “Resources necessary for jump-starting

the economy are covered entirely from the Hungarian budget,” the ministry said, adding that expenditures were lifted by 123.1 billion forints for competitiveness-boosting grants for businesses as part of the policy response to the economic impact of the coronavirus crisis. It also noted a combined 302.8 billion forints in spending on road developments and upkeep, 29.1 billion for investments carried out in the framework of the Modern Cities Programme and 27.0 billion in subsidies for purchases of vehicles by large families. One-off performance bonuses for healthcare professionals cost the budget 101.3 billion. “Although the economic recovery has begun, the jump-start after the state of emergency will continue to require resources of a large scale. It is the government’s intention to give Hungarian businesses all means of support and to create as many workplaces as have been lost because of the pandemic,” the ministry said.

MORE HUNGARIANS VACATION LOCALLY

Domestic travellers spent 672,000 guest nights at commercial accommodations in Hungary in June, rising closer to levels a year earlier, data released by the Central Statistical Office (KSH) show.

The number of guest nights spent by domestic travellers stood at 40.8% of levels in the same month a year earlier, improving after reaching just 14.1% of the annualised level in

May, as the country came out of a lockdown to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus. The number of guest nights spent by foreign visitors reached 101,000 in June, just 6.8% of the number in the same month a year earlier. Hungarians spent 232,000 guest nights in the area around Lake Balaton, making it the most popular travel destination in June. Revenue of commercial accommodations fell 77.0% to 12 billion forints in June from the same month a year earlier.

For the period January-June, the number of guest nights at commercial accommodations dropped 60.6% year-on-year to 5,197,000. The number of guest nights spent by domestic travellers fell by 54.5% to 2,920,000 and the number spent by foreigners slipped by 66.4% to 2,259,000.

Revenue of commercial accommodations dropped 58.7% to 99 billion forints in January-June.

GOVT MULLS MEASURES PROMOTING FLEXIBLE WORK ENVIRONMENT

The government is mulling measures to boost employment in Hungary with a legislative package expected to be submitted to parliament in the autumn, as preparation for a potential second wave of the novel coronavirus epidemic, a government official told business daily Világgazdaság. Plans include expanding remote work opportunities and providing an environment where the site of the work done could be freely chosen,

while adhering to safety standards, Sándor Bodó, a state secretary of the innovation and technology ministry, said. The employer would also have the opportunity to contribute to households' utility fees and the support purchase of the equipment needed for work, he said. Creating jobs is the most important part of the government's economy protection plan, which has so far helped around one million people, Bodó said. The government continues to monitor changes on the labour market and is ready to introduce further measures, he said. According to the latest data, the number of registered job seekers continues to rise after hitting a low point in June, he said. The restart of the economy is another reason to be hopeful, Bodó said.