

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/György Varga

Ambulance staff check temperatures at Hungary-Slovenia border amid coronavirus outbreak

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

EU justice ministers' meeting in Brussels

Szijjártó addresses Mercedes-Benz event in Kecskemét

TOP STORY

CORONAVIRUS CASES RISE TO 16

Hungary's government information website koronavirus.gov.hu on Thursday confirmed another three cases of the new coronavirus, bringing the number of confirmed cases of Covid-19 in the country to 16.

Two of the new virus cases are Hungarian citizens and the third an Iranian national, the website said. One of the Hungarians is a woman who had been in isolation at Budapest's St. János Hospital for days and the other a man who had recently returned from Israel. The Iranian patient was a contact of the first Iranian student to test positive last week. In line with the protocol issued by the National Chief Medical Officer, investigation into their prior whereabouts and personal contacts over the past two weeks will start immediately. Of the 16 people diagnosed with Covid-19 in Hungary so far, nine are Iranian citizens, six Hungarians and one is British. The number of people in quarantine has decreased from 69 to 65 while the health authority has done tests on 730 samples, the website said.

Meanwhile, a new series of tests of an Iranian patient isolated with a confirmed coronavirus infection in Budapest have come back negative, a hospital official said late on Thursday. The recovered patient was scheduled to be released from the hospital before the end of the day, the official said.

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GOVT ISSUES DECREE DETAILING STATE OF EMERGENCY MEASURES

Hungary's decree detailing measures to be taken under a state of emergency declared because of the coronavirus re-establishes controls along Hungary's borders with Slovenia and Austria; prohibits entry into the country by foreign nationals arriving from Italy, China, South Korea and Iran, but orders mandatory self-quarantine for Hungarian nationals arriving from those areas; bans on-site lectures at universities; prohibits in-door events with more than 100 participants and outdoor ones with more than 500; suspends the launch of a state-subsidised foreign language summer study programme abroad for secondary school students by one year; cancels all school trips abroad; and extends the validity of official documents by 15 days from the revocation of the state of emergency. The decree provides for the expulsion from the country of foreign nationals who do not comply with mandatory quarantine. It requires all health-care workers, military and reserve military personnel, police, National Tax and Customs Office (NAV) staff and government administration workers to get a special ministerial permit to leave the country. It also establishes that foreign nationals from European Economic Area countries who have the right to permanent residence in Hungary and can show a permanent

residency card are "subject to the same treatment" as Hungarian citizens. The decree is in force from Thursday.

Police will monitor residents' compliance with home quarantine regulations and local mayors will be responsible for services to people in home isolation, the government website koronavirus.gov.hu said. In line with extraordinary government measures introduced to combat the epidemic, authorities will have the right to oblige potentially infected people to stay in home quarantine, the website said. Hungarian citizens returning from Italy, China, South Korea and Iran must undergo health examination upon entry into Hungary and must stay in home isolation even if they are free of symptoms, it added. People suspected of being infected with the virus will have to stay in quarantine in hospital but even those who are free of symptoms will have to stay in home isolation for 14 days. The health authority will register such persons and police will make sure that they comply with the home quarantine regulations. In line with the newly introduced extraordinary government measures, workers in health-care, law enforcement, the army and public administration are banned from travelling abroad. Ministry staff need special permission to make official trips issued by the minister or prime minister. The Hungarian army will provide support to the police and disaster management authority in carrying out their tasks, it added.

KARÁCSONY: BUDAPEST'S CINEMAS, THEATRES, MUSEUMS, LIBRARIES TO BE CLOSED

Budapest's cinemas, theatres, museums and libraries are being closed down for the time being in connection with the new coronavirus, Gergely Karácsony, the city's mayor, announced on Thursday. Performances will be suspended in all cinemas and theatres maintained by the municipality, while museums and all branches of the Szabó Ervin Library will be closed. Whereas the decision will have "a severe impact" on the capital's institutional network, it is necessary to minimise the risk of an epidemic, he added. Efforts are being made to reduce the risk of the virus's spread on public transport, with ticket sales on vehicles stopped on Friday. Meanwhile, passengers can board buses using all doors.

He said the municipality urged the government and employers to think about introducing staggered work times so that fewer people use public transport at peak times. Employers, he said, should allow as many employees as possible the chance to work from home. Budapest will inform passengers about the latest developments concerning the protection of public transport vehicles on information boards in the coming days, he added. Karácsony has also asked the government to draft a protocol for handling an epidemic when it came to the use of public transport.

On the topic of municipal cooperation with the central government, the mayor said the government's decisions determined many of the capital's actions, yet, he insisted, there was a lack of adequate information. Decision-making should be transparent and all government decisions should be implemented strictly, he said. "We don't want to bandy about advice to the government, but we feel its recent decisions are unlikely to stand the test of time, and that new, braver decisions will be needed," he said.

Deputy Mayor Kata Tüttö said no restrictions have been placed on use of the capital's thermal baths and spas yet, but the national operative board in charge of handling the new coronavirus was expected to advise on the matter.

GULYÁS PLEDGES REGULAR CONSULTATIONS WITH PARTIES

The government will hold regular consultations with the parliamentary parties with regard to the coronavirus situation, Gergely Gulyás, head of the Prime Minister's Office, has said. "In the current crisis it is necessary to build a partnership, even with adversaries," he said. Ensuring that all conditions are in place for combatting the virus is in the interest of both the government and the opposition, he said, adding that parliament's consent is required should the 15-day state of emergency, introduced earlier in the day, need

to be extended. Máté Kocsis, ruling Fidesz's group leader, welcomed plans to hold weekly consultations, adding that "there is no room for political debates over coronavirus". He called for the broadest possible cooperation within parliament. Answering a question, Kocsis said that Fidesz does not support suspending parliament's work because "while others are working, parliament will have to do so, too".

Socialist deputy group leader Tamás Harangozó pledged his party's support for any parliamentary measures necessary to combat the epidemic. László György Lukács, deputy group leader of the Jobbik party, said his party supported measures against the virus, but also noted his party's objections such as against the government's reluctance to close down schools. LMP co-leader Erzsébet Schmuck said that the opposition "wishes to participate in constructive cooperation that rise above party interests" and fight successfully against the epidemic. Sándor Burány, Párbeszéd's deputy group leader, said that "we cannot afford to have no coordination within the government" and criticised the government for "not providing any assistance" to Hungarians wishing to return from Italy, adding that there were no protocols to screen those arriving in Hungary.

The Socialist Party is submitting a package of proposals to lawmakers in connection with the new coronavirus, with a view to protecting health-care

employees, the elderly and children. At a news conference on Thursday, Bertalan Tóth, the party's leader, also announced that the Socialist Party's congress scheduled for Saturday will be cancelled. Tóth proposed placing disinfectants on public transport, increasing the duration that jobless people can receive benefits, and hiking pensions by 6.5% with immediate effect.

Further, in the event of school closures, parents should benefit from more flexible regulations in the workplace, he said. Tóth also said multinationals should refrain from repatriating their billions of forints of profits from the country.

The opposition Democratic Coalition (DK) has asked the government to implement three proposals the party has prepared with a view to protecting people above the age of 60, a group most vulnerable to the new coronavirus, MEP Klára Dobrev said. DK asked the government to allocate resources for local councils to organise services for people in the age group to get food, medical supplies and any necessary administration in order to enable them to stay at home for the next four to six weeks. The party wants the government to oblige employers to reduce working hours for parents with small children in order to alleviate the need for grandparents to pick up their grandchildren from schools and kindergartens, she added. Any cut in wages resulting from this measure should be reimbursed from a dedicated state fund, she said.

Additionally, the party wants the government to extend the deadline for all public utility bills so as to prevent older people from having to stand in line at the post office for making the paper-based payments, she said. In response to a question concerning the state of emergency introduced by the government, Dobrev said the government should have introduced protective measures weeks ago. She added that 8 billion forints (EUR 23.7m) had been allocated for combating the coronavirus as against 150 billion forints for government communication, whereas “everybody would feel safer if this was the other way round”.

Meanwhile, The PSZ and PDSZ teacher unions are calling on the government to order a suspension of classes at all schools in Hungary due to the outbreak of the new coronavirus, PSZ leader Zsuzsa Szabó said at a press conference. She said PSZ disagreed with the government’s decision not to apply the state of emergency declared on Wednesday to schools, citing worldwide public school closures. Szabó argued that although few children and young people were getting infected with the virus, they presented a “high risk” to others as potential virus carriers. She added that closing schools would also protect teachers whose average age range is 48-50. She said both Hungary’s education law and the human resources ministry resolution regulating the school calendar allowed for extraordinary

school breaks. Even if schools could not make up for all of the time lost during such a break, the law would allow for them to cover any leftover material in the 2020-2021 school year, she argued.

PDSZ also argued in favour of closing schools, saying that schools could still get through the curriculum by moving to distance learning.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: FOUR MORE HUNGARIANS RELEASED FROM QUARANTINE ABROAD

Four more Hungarian citizens quarantined abroad due to the suspicion that they may be infected by the new coronavirus have been released, the foreign minister said. Those released recently include a female law student in Germany and three Hungarians who had been quarantined for weeks in Japan, Péter Szijjártó said in a Facebook entry. The Hungarian authorities reach out to all Hungarians placed in isolation and provide them with whatever help they can, he said. Meanwhile, the minister said a Hungarian national had been quarantined in Vietnam after travelling on a plane with an infected person. He said there were also two Hungarians on board the Grand Princes cruise ship that recently docked in Oakland, California. There are another four Hungarians in a resort in the Maldives that had to be quarantined because of the virus, he said.

ORBÁN: STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH MOLDOVA IN EU'S INTEREST

The European Union has a vested interest in forming strategic partnerships with its eastern neighbours like Moldova and in being open to their accession to the bloc and pursuing economic cooperation with them, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said after talks with his Moldovan counterpart in Chisinau. At a press conference held jointly with Moldovan Prime Minister Ion Chicu, Orbán described Hungarian-Moldovan relations as “good and dynamic”, underlining Hungary’s commitment to backing Moldova’s European integration. Moldova has both an association and a free trade agreement in place with the EU, Orbán said, adding that the country still had more opportunities for cooperation with the bloc. Concerning the EU, Orbán said that though it was “not easy” for a member state to enforce its national interests within the bloc, “it is still better to be on the inside than on the outside despite all the difficulties”. The prime minister said he had advised his Moldovan counterpart to pursue the closest possible cooperation with the EU.

Ahead of the press conference, the two leaders signed a bilateral strategic partnership agreement. Orbán said this had a diplomatic aspect as it involved Hungary to

share with Moldova its experiences with European integration. The agreement also aims to deepen bilateral economic cooperation, he said, adding that Hungary has opened a 100 million dollar credit line to this end. Hungary aims to replicate the cooperation the two countries have achieved in the banking and pharmaceutical sectors in the fields of agriculture and education, too, Orbán said. He revealed that the two countries were working on setting up a joint higher education institution that would issue degrees recognised in both Hungary and Moldova.

Meanwhile, Orbán said that at the talks the Hungarian delegation was briefed by Moldova's health minister on the country's response to the new coronavirus outbreak, adding that the two sides had discussed opportunities for the two countries to cooperate in their fight against the virus.

Chicu said Orbán's visit to the Moldovan capital would give a new boost to the development of the two countries' partnership. The prime minister thanked Hungary for its support of Moldova's modernisation and the Hungarian projects being carried out in the country. He added, however, that despite the "numerous success stories", there was still untapped potential in bilateral cooperation. Chicu expressed support for Hungarian bank OTP expanding its operations in Moldova. He said the new bilateral strategic partnership agreement aimed to deepen and broaden cooperation between the

two countries and support Moldova's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Orbán was later scheduled to address a Hungarian-Moldovan business forum before meeting Moldovan President Igor Dodon and Parliamentary Speaker Zinaida Greceanii.

HUNGARY MEDIA FREE WITH WIDE RANGE OF VIEWS, SAYS US STATE DEPT REPORT

Hungary's media players are active and express a wide range of views, the US State Department said in its 2019 country report on human rights practices in which it also cited reports of legal restrictions on civil groups. The report also said that Hungary's courts had generally functioned independently over the past year. It added, at the same time, that though the government generally respected the rights of detainees, official statistics and NGOs had reported overcrowding and poor physical conditions in the country's prison system.

The State Department also touched on the United Nations' and the European Commission's criticism of the government's treatment of migrants and asylum seekers, noting reports from 2018 of migrants being pushed back to the Serbian side of the fence on Hungary's southern border. During the past year, however, human rights groups "reported receiving fewer complaints of excessive use of police force and abuse against refugees and

migrants, as the number of asylum seekers decreased from previous years", the document said. Concerning the issue of anti-Semitism, the report said the Jewish organisation Action and Protection Foundation (TEV) had registered 32 anti-Semitic hate crimes in 2018. Of those, 19 cases concerned hate speech, 10 were crimes of vandalism, and three were assault. The report also noted that Hungary successfully hosted the European Maccabi Games in Budapest between July 29 and Aug. 7.

SOLTÉSZ URGES CLOSER COOPERATION AMONG CARPATHIAN BASIN NATIONS

Strengthening cooperation and friendship among nations in the Carpathian Basin is an "important mission" for Hungary, the state secretary in charge of minority relations at the Prime Minister's Office has said. At a press conference in Mátrászentimre, in northern Hungary, Miklós Soltész highlighted the role of minority self-government-run institutions in boosting cooperation in the area.

"The Hungarian government considers even the smallest minority and ethnic community to be important," he said, calling the village of Mátrászentimre a model of Hungarian-Slovak coexistence. The state secretary said important development and investment projects have been implemented in

the village in partnership of the central government and the national and local Slovak self-governments over the past years. He added that the government will provide 77 million forints (EUR 229.200) for the purchase of a property and the renovation of a church in the village this year. As regards Hungary's Slovak minority, Soltész said the government will provide a total of 235 million forints for the upgrade and refurbishment of Slovak-language schools this year.

INDUSTRIAL OUTPUT UP 2.4% YR/YR IN JAN

Industrial output in Hungary rose by an annual 2.4% in January, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said, confirming the preliminary estimate. Adjusted for the number of working days, output was up 2.7%. Month on month, output rose by 4.6%, adjusted for seasonal and workday effects, KSH said. Output of Hungary's automotive sector, an engine of industrial growth, climbed 10.6% year on year, picking up after a decline in the previous month. Output of the sector, which accounts for about

31 % of total manufacturing output, had fallen by 10.4% in December. Output of the computer, electronics and optical equipment sector, which accounts for around 12% of manufacturing output, increased by 8.4% in January. Output of food, drink and tobacco products rose by 5.3%. The sector generates around 11% of manufacturing output.

MASTERPLAST TO ACQUIRE GERMAN PLANT

Hungarian building materials company Masterplast has announced an agreement to acquire a plant in Germany from a "recognised" German peer. "The agreement covers the assignment of all rights and obligations relating to the plant, including, but not limited to, real estate assets, inventory, sales and supplier contracts, production lines and certain intellectual property rights," Masterplast said in a disclosure posted on the website of the Budapest Stock Exchange. The plant in Aschersleben makes diffusion foils for the building materials industry as well as industrial

membranes on a proprietary production line. Masterplast said it will disclose further details regarding the transaction "after signing the full package of contracts". Trade in Masterplast shares was suspended on Wednesday pending an extraordinary announcement. Trade of the shares resumed at 4pm.

HUNGARIAN TOLL COLLECTION COMPANY NUSZ SEALS DEAL WITH ECUADOR

Hungary's state-owned toll company NUSZ has signed an agreement with Ecuador's transport minister to undertake a feasibility study and implement a pilot project on the rollout of an electronic toll system similar to the one in Hungary. The agreement was signed by Ecuador's Minister of Transportation and Public Works Jose Gabriel Martinez Castro and NUSZ CEO Tamás Bartal in Quito, NUSZ said on its website. NUSZ is also in talks with officials in Colombia and Peru on switching over to electronic toll systems.