

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Péter Lakatos

Budapest's Chain Bridge lit in national colours on the March 15 holiday

UPCOMING EVENTS

Stats office releases construction figures in Jan

Plenary session of parliament

Coronavirus updates

TOP STORY

FIRST CORONAVIRUS DEATH IN HUNGARY

A Hungarian patient, a 75-year-old man taken to the South Pest Central Hospital with Covid-19 symptoms and pneumonia, is the first person to have died from the new virus in Hungary.

The number of confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Hungary grew to 32 on Sunday, the koronavirus.gov.hu website said. The authorities have started investigating whom the new patients may have been in contact with. Of the 32 people diagnosed with Covid-19 in Hungary so far, nine are Iranian, 22 Hungarian and one is British. One patient has fully recovered, the website said. The number of people in quarantine is currently 79 while the health authority has done tests on 1,236 samples, it added. Zoltán Kovács on Sunday expressed his and the Hungarian government's condolences over the first coronavirus-related death. The government is providing all resources for the response to the epidemic, and all equipment necessary is available, the state secretary for international communication and relations said.

Hungary's schools are closed from Monday, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in a video message on Facebook on Friday evening. Schools will continue education through digital channels from March 16, and no personal presence at the school will be required, Orbán said.

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**ORBÁN: HUNGARY'S
SCHOOLS CLOSED
FROM MONDAY**

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has said students will be able to prepare for their school-leaving exams, which were likely to be held as normal. Small day-care groups may be set up if necessary, he said, though it would be better for children to stay at home. Children should not be looked after by grandparents who are vulnerable to the coronavirus infection. "Let's protect our parents, let's protect our grandparents and let's protect each other," he said.

The government has reviewed Hungary's medical supplies, Orbán said, adding that the national health services could handle tens of thousands of patients with Covid-19. The country's laboratory capacities are good for several thousand tests, he added. Health institutions have 22 million pairs of rubber gloves and 1.2 million surgical face masks, while another 1 million will soon be obtained, the prime minister said. Hungary has 2,000 respirators and 2,000 anesthesia units, Orbán said, adding that the purchase of further machines was under way.

The government has set up ten action groups to combat the virus, Orbán said. One group for education is headed by Zoltán Maruzsa, state secretary for public education, another for the construction of a mobile container hospital by Tamás

Tóth. Defence Minister Tibor Benkő will oversee the group in charge of the security of strategic companies. Gergely Gulyás, the head of the Prime Minister's Office, is in charge of the state of emergency, while Finance Minister Mihály Varga heads the financial action group, Orbán said.

The government has also set up a coronavirus medication and vaccine research group headed by Ferenc Jakab, and a border control group led by János Balogh, the national police chief, Orbán said. Since several travellers were diagnosed with the virus after they had returned from Israel to Hungary, Israel has been included in the list of countries from where no foreigners are allowed to enter Hungary, Orbán said. That list now includes Iran, China, South Korea, Italy and Israel, he said.

Hungary is keeping its borders closed to Serbian nationals coming from Italy and seeking to return home, Orbán said in a video message posted on Facebook in Belgrade on Sunday. Orbán travelled to the Serbian capital to hold talks with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. He said they discussed protective measures implemented against the coronavirus epidemic. Orbán said that as regards the common theme of the Serbian-Hungarian border they agreed that cargo transport could continue under security measures. "Hungary however is not in a position to allow

entry of those coming from Italy, including Serbian citizens who want to go back to Serbia," Orbán said.

Meanwhile, trains will not cross the Hungarian borders with Croatia, Slovenia or Ukraine, the national rail company MAV said on Sunday. Budapest-Zagreb express services have been cancelled from today, though the train will stop at Gyékényes, the stop before the border. Similarly, Slovenian Railways is halting passenger services to and from Hungary from midnight. The train to Ljubljana will stop at Őrszentpéter. Ukraine is closing the rail border crossing between Záhony and Csap from Tuesday. EuroCity trains will no longer travel between Vienna and Kiev from Monday, MAV said in the statement.

In a separate development, Interior Minister Sándor Pintér has been tested for the new coronavirus as a matter of routine after last week meeting the Moroccan transport minister, who has since tested positive for the virus, the government information centre said. Moroccan media said on Saturday that Abdelkader Amara tested positive for the virus. The minister visited Hungary and met the interior minister, among others. Pintér shows no symptoms, the statement said. He will undergo the same examinations as everyone who has come into contact with Covid-19 patients, and the results will be made public, the statement added.



**KOVÁCS: GOVT HAS
CREATED CONDITIONS
FOR RELIABLE
INFORMATION FLOW**

The government has created the conditions for clear, credible and reliable information flow on the coronavirus epidemic, and citizens can find the latest, clearest and most accurate information on the infection on the koronavirus.gov.hu website, the state secretary for international communications and relations told public broadcaster Kossuth Rádió. The most important task is to eliminate rumours and hoaxes. "We must speak responsibly about the virus," he said, adding that "this is especially important advice for the sensationalist press, including the opposition media in particular." Kovács cited the example of the false rumours that Budapest and Debrecen would be completely quarantined, which circulated for 3-4 days. The government always systematically provides reliable news to the public and the press, providing clear guidance each day, with experts informing the press after meetings of the operative board in charge of handling the new coronavirus, he said, adding that the opposition was showing "political irresponsibility" by making statements for political gain. He said that instead of attacks, the government expected clear cooperation from the opposition, which is in the interest of Hungary and the Hungarian people.

HR ministry orders health-care providers to protect older employees

The Human Resources Ministry called on health-care institutions to separate staff who are more than 65 years old from patients and have them consult with colleagues over the phone. The ministry said the spread of the new coronavirus presented particular dangers to the elderly and those with chronic health conditions, and the most important measure was to drastically cut down on interactions between doctors and patients. Scheduled surgeries will be postponed until the state of emergency is lifted, and operations will go ahead only if urgent, the ministry said.

Meanwhile, the human resources ministry has agreed with health-care unions to postpone strike negotiations until the crisis is over.

**OPPOSITION PARTIES
PROPOSE MEASURES
TO HELP PARENTS DURING
SCHOOL SHUTDOWN**

Three opposition parties proposed measures to ease the burden on the parents of schoolchildren, after the government announced temporary closure of Hungarian elementary and high schools as part the response to the new coronavirus outbreak.

The Democratic Coalition (DK) has come up with six proposals regarding school shutdowns, lawmaker Gergely Arató told a press conference. DK proposes payment of full wages for parents who stay at home with their

children to protect grandparents from a possible infection, Arató said. He called on the government to organise day care for the children of policemen, soldiers, health-care workers, journalists and others whose position does not allow a lengthy leave. Children from disadvantaged families should continue to have access to free school lunches, he said.

Regarding a transition to digital teaching materials, Arató proposed that channels of the public television should broadcast elementary school materials which then should be made available on the internet. Arató also called on the government to make a decision on the shutdown of kindergartens and creches.

At a separate press conference, Socialist lawmaker Ágnes Kunhalmi said the prime minister was late in recognising the "right thing to do", insisting that Viktor Orbán on Friday morning "threatened" teachers with an unpaid leave and students with having to repeat the year in the case of a school shutdown. He then ordered the shutdown on Friday evening, she said.

Kunhalmi said local authorities would need additional resources and protective gear to handle the state of emergency. She insisted that 600 billion forints (EUR 1.8bn) could be "easily" reallocated in the central budget to coronavirus response. This could be done by using the 450 billion forint in budget reserve, halving the 100-billion-forint budget of the public media and by stripping the "propaganda ministry" of its entire 150 billion forint allocation.



KARÁCSONY: BUDAPEST'S NURSERIES TO BE CLOSED

Nurseries and creches in Budapest will be closing down gradually starting on Monday, due to the new coronavirus outbreak, Gergely Karácsony, the city's mayor, said. All Budapest districts will provide care for children who cannot be placed elsewhere, Karácsony said after talks with the district mayors and the Budapest operative board coordinating the city's response to the outbreak. The Budapest authority will continue to provide warm meals for children whose families cannot afford to do so, he said.

Regarding public transport, Karacsony said that from Monday, passengers will not be allowed to board buses using the front door. The frequency of public transport remains for the time being unchanged, he said, but may be cut later if passenger numbers fall. Meanwhile, the community bike system Bubi will be available for 100 forints (EUR 0.3) from Monday, he said. Spas and the Budapest Zoo will also be temporarily closed as of Monday, he said. Karácsony asked Budapest residents to cooperate as much as possible. The best thing to do, he said, was "to bring the city as close to a standstill as possible".

Karácsony also called on the government to allow mayors to close or reduce opening hours of shops

that do not offer essential supplies.

In a Facebook post, Karácsony said several European cities have made similar decisions as the epidemic intensifies. Shops offering goods that are not essential for everyday living are unnecessary meeting points, he said, adding that opening hours either should be shortened or non-essential shops should be closed altogether in order to contain the virus.

Shops selling daily supplies, tobacco products, medical equipment or fuel, as well as pharmacies, post offices and banks could be exempt from such a measure, Karácsony said. The state of emergency which the government announced on Wednesday allows the government to hand such powers to local authorities. Councils could then tailor their response to the new coronavirus according to their own needs, he said.

Meanwhile, police have arrested and questioned a 30-year-old man suspected of spreading a rumour over the internet that the authorities were about to close off Budapest in connection with the new virus, the Interior Ministry said on Sunday. National cybercrime police identified the YouTube user, a resident of Budapest who works as a security guard at a hotel, and seized computer equipment from his home as well as suspected plant-based drugs. During questioning, the man admitted to uploading the video.

SZIJJÁRTÓ, DI MAIO DISCUSS STATE OF EPIDEMIC

Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó on Sunday talked by phone with Italian counterpart Luigi di Maio to discuss the current state of the coronavirus epidemic. In a Facebook post, Szijjártó said he pledged Hungary's solidarity with the Italian government, noting that the authorities are handling extremely grave challenges. The ministers agreed that data and information exchange were crucial in containing the spread of the virus, and pledged to stay in close contact and brief one another on their countries' respective status. Besides the duty to protect people's lives and their health, ensuring everyday supplies for families is also a top priority, the ministers said. Tight border control measures on the Hungarian borders serve precisely this end, Szijjártó said, adding that the aim was to contain the virus while securely providing supplies necessary for "families and factories".

HUNGARIAN NATIONAL HOLIDAY MARKED

The national flag was hoisted with military honours in front of Parliament on the March 15 national holiday. The ceremony was attended by President János Áder and House Speaker László Kövér. The single central event of this year's March 15 national holiday was attended by only a few people

in Kossuth Square. All other central events, including Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech, which had been due to be delivered in front of the National Museum, and the award ceremony of the Kossuth and Széchenyi prizes, have been cancelled due to the new virus outbreak.

March 15 marks the beginning of the 1848 revolution, part of a series of uprisings in Europe that year. On March 15, citizens of Pest gathered in front of the National Museum and demanded independence from Habsburg rule. Hungary's first independent government with Count Lajos Batthyány as prime minister approved a reform package called the April laws. Later, the uprising grew into a war of independence, stifled by Austria and Russia in late 1849.

In his televised address, President János Áder said the strength of March 15 lies in freedom and loyalty. Referring to the coronavirus outbreak, Áder asked Hungarians to commemorate 1848 at home "at this time under more modest circumstances, with a little bit more concern, but with trust".

If Hungarians were able to trust one another 172 years ago, "we then can count on each other and rely on each other today", he said. "Despite the historical perspective, March 15 still feels close to us, because this day marks the birthday of a civil Hungary," Áder said, adding that the history of 1848/49 was full of "outstanding human achievements" that "keep the past alive for us even after such a long period of time."

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán greeted Hungarian communities in neighbouring countries on the March 15 national holiday. In a letter sent to ethnic Hungarian communities in Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine, the prime minister commemorated Hungary's 1848/49 revolution and freedom fight as well as the centenary of the Trianon Peace Treaty. "March 15, 1848 is a common legacy and celebration of all Hungarians. Wherever we live in the world, we all remember the young heroes of the revolution and those who fought together under the banner of Hungarian freedom." Orbán said this year's celebration is given a special emphasis by the fact that the year 2020 marks the 100th anniversary of the signing of the WWI Trianon Peace Treaty under which two-thirds of Hungary's territory was ceded to neighbouring countries. "Just as 172 years ago, Hungary cannot exist today without the Hungarian communities in Transylvania, Northern Serbia, Southern Slovakia and Transcarpathia, and it is our shared duty and responsibility to strengthen these communities and protect their rights," he said in his letter.

ÁDER GREETS POLISH PRESIDENT IN LETTER

President János Áder has sent a letter to Andrzej Duda to greet the Polish president who had to cancel his visit to Hungary because of the coronavirus epidemic, the president's office said. In

his letter, Áder expressed his sincere regret that the meeting and events planned for celebrating the Day of Hungarian-Polish Friendship had to be cancelled, the office said. This means that the Hungarian president would not have the opportunity to personally present to Andrzej Duda Hungary's highest state award to foreign heads of state, the Hungarian Order of Merit, Grand Cross with the chain and golden radiant star. "As a committed friend of our country and a statesman who can see the importance of Hungarian-Polish coordinated action in Europe, he has done a lot to protect the interests of both countries and promote their common aspirations," the office quoted Áder as saying in his laudation planned for the March 20 event.

OPPOSITION PARTIES MARK MARCH 15 IN JOINT VIDEO MESSAGE

Hungary's major opposition parties commemorated March 15 in a joint video message. The joint demonstration they planned was cancelled because of the coronavirus outbreak.

Péter Jakab, the leader of the conservative Jobbik party, said that in 1848 conservatives and liberals, noblemen and serfs had fought together to dismantle feudalism. "The task today is the same: we must dismantle a system that supports corruption, overtaxes Hungarians, destroys the rule of law and generates hatred instead of solidarity," he said.

Socialist lawmaker Ágnes Kunhalmi, calling on the spirit of 1848, said Hungary needed a new democratic government to transform the country into a republic once again. Katalin Cseh, an MEP of the centrist Momentum Movement, said that March 15 was a celebration of young, rebellious and freedom-loving people. Ferenc Gyurcsány, the leader of the leftist Democratic Coalition (DK), said March 15 was not only a celebration but an event that served as a clarion call to the opposition “to fight”. “We stand united in this great fight in order to restore a democratic, European-Hungarian republic,” he said. János Kenderney, the leader of the green LMP party, outlined the party’s demands along the lines of the 12-point proclamation of 1848. This time, he said the demands were to protect the climate, the environment, the habitat and value of farmland, and respect future generations. He also called for freedom of the media and education system. Tímea

Szabó, the leader of the green-liberal Párbeszéd party, appealed to the youth who “clearly understand the challenges of our time”. They are those who organise climate protests demanding “a green, sustainable and social future”. Anett Bósz, the leader of the Hungarian Liberal Party, said Hungary’s “biggest tragedy” was that, just like in 1848, the cause of freedom and a free press still had to be addressed.

Meanwhile Budapest mayor Gergely Karácsony in a video message described Budapest as being “a rebellious city” again, as it was in 1848, because residents had taken a stand for freedom, equality and fraternity again in the municipal election last October. “It is not only the threat of the epidemic that deprives us of a joyful celebration”, Karácsony said. “When reading the twelve points of the 1848 revolution, we may have had the unsettling feeling for years how relevant these demands are, in fact, how they have become even more

so,” he added. “Thirty years ago we wanted these things to change, and yet the message of this peaceful, joyful and patriotic holiday seems to be getting farther away from us, maybe farther away than it was in 1989/90”.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: TIME TO DEVELOP HUNGARY-SLOVENIA COOPERATION

It is time to develop Hungarian-Slovenian economic, energy and cultural cooperation after “sham conflicts” created over the past years, the foreign minister said, congratulating the new Slovenian government on its inauguration. Hungary and Slovenia are both slated to benefit from future cooperation, Péter Szijjártó said. Hungary is ready to build the cooperation on mutual respect, he said. Slovenia’s parliament approved the centre-right interim coalition government of Janez Janša on Friday.