

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI / Csaba Kirzsfán

20km tailback at the Austria-Hungary border

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

Presser on tenders supporting energy innovation pilot projects

Stats office prelim report on commercial lodgings in Jan 2020

TOP STORY

HUNGARY RESEARCH TEAM ISOLATES CORONAVIRUS

Researchers at Hungary's National Centre for Public Health (NNK) have become the first in the country to successfully isolate the new coronavirus that causes the Covid-19 disease, the chief medical officer said.

The breakthrough will allow scientists to begin developing a vaccine against the virus and to test various therapies, Cecilia Müller told a press conference after a meeting of the operative board coordinating the epidemic response. The team at NNK's national security lab that isolated the virus was led by virologist Zoltán Kiss, she said, adding that it would provide live and non-live samples of the virus to both Hungarian and foreign researchers.

Müller also said the number of coronavirus patients in Hungary is expected to reach the hundreds over the coming days, adding that the spread of the virus was in line with NNK's projections. She said that on average one infected patient communicated the virus with two to three other people. Health-care services are being adapted so that patients with possible complications can be treated, she said. Concerning the Covid-19 cases currently being treated in Hungarian hospitals, Müller said that two of them were in a serious condition, requiring ventilators.

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CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER: GOVT TAKING STEPS TO ACCELERATE CORONAVIRUS TESTING

Hungary's government has ordered "many" coronavirus tests and will take steps to accelerate laboratory procedures, chief medical officer Cecília Müller told a press conference after a meeting of the operative board coordinating the epidemic response. Answering a question about coronavirus testing protocols, Müller said that the number of test laboratories has been "significantly increased", noting that there was a larger demand in view of the number of new cases and contacts.

Asked why the numbers of cases broken down geographically were not available, Müller said the aim was to fight the epidemic rather than to cause panic. She also said there was a sufficient number of ventilators in the country, with more to be purchased.

Müller warned seniors above 70 not to leave their homes, or keep a distance of 2 metres from other people should they still need to go out. Concerning younger people, she said that outdoor activities were recommended to otherwise healthy people without Covid-19 symptoms, if not done in groups.

NUMBER OF CONFIRMED COVID-19 CASES REACHES 50

The number of confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Hungary reached 50

on Tuesday, the koronavirus.gov.hu website said. Of the confirmed cases, 39 are Hungarian, 9 are Iranian, one is British and one Kazakh, the official website for disseminating information on the new coronavirus said. Late on Monday, the website reported that a second patient treated with Covid-19 has recovered. The Iranian citizen in question has been discharged from hospital, it said. One patient has died and two have recovered so far. A total of 1,436 tests have been conducted in Hungary, while 159 people are currently being held under observation in isolation, the website said. A search for possible contacts of the new patients is under way. At a Monday press conference, chief medical officer Cecília Müller said the epidemic has entered a new phase, appearing in clusters rather than in individual cases or small communities.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY TO ALLOW TRANSIT OF ROMANIAN, BULGARIAN NATIONALS

Hungary will open a transit route for Romanian and Bulgarian citizens stranded at the Austrian-Hungarian border on Tuesday night, Foreign Minister Peter Szijjártó said. In a Facebook entry, Szijjártó said he had held talks with his Bulgarian and Romanian counterparts by phone, who had asked that Hungary enable their citizens stranded in Austria to return home. "Our priority is protecting the health of Hungarians," Szijjártó

said. "This is the aim of the border protection measures." Taking all this into consideration, Hungary will allow Romanian and Bulgarian citizens a one-off transit through Hungary on a fixed route on Tuesday night, Szijjártó said. He added that Hungary expected both the Bulgarian and Romanian authorities to inform their citizens that Hungary's borders are closed to all foreign travellers. Hungary also expects the Austrian authorities to maintain order on their side of the border and to ensure the safe passage of Hungarian citizens and freight traffic into the country, the minister said.

Meanwhile, public news channel M1 reported that foreign nationals had blocked traffic at the Hegyeshalom border station in an effort to persuade the Hungarian authorities to open the border. According to M1's on-site correspondent, some 60-70 people got out of their vehicles around noon and have since been blocking the entry of freight trucks into Hungary. The Győr-Moson-Sopron county police said a 20km tailback had formed on the Austrian side of the border.

KARÁCSONY: PLAYGROUNDS IN BUDAPEST CLOSED

The city of Budapest will close down its playgrounds due to the coronavirus epidemic, Mayor Gergely Karácsony told an online press conference. The mayor said live on Facebook that objects at playgrounds could communicate the new virus and

asked parents to keep children away from those facilities that cannot be physically shut down. Karácsony also said that parking would not be made free in the city, arguing that though there are fewer cars running, there are as many as usual or even more parking.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: REGION'S COUNTRIES STRONGLY INTER-DEPENDENT

Countries of the region are strongly inter-dependent when it comes to protecting people's health, maintaining supplies and sustaining the economy, Péter Szijjártó, the foreign minister, said. Szijjártó noted that he consulted his Czech, Slovakian and Austrian counterparts in a videoconference, and he emphasised that while taking measures at national level, countries should bear in mind the scale of their impact on neighbouring countries.

The officials agreed that measures should be planned for a timescale of months rather than weeks. The aim of the Hungarian government's decision to ban foreigners from entering the country while allowing freight traffic is to protect people's health while maintaining supply chains, he said. Szijjártó noted that Hungary's trade with its neighbours is worth 42 billion euros, adding that ensuring seamless freight transport between them was highly important.

He said that special Hungary-Slovakia border arrangements may be possible in light of the countries'

strong ties, but current rules will apply in the meantime. Regarding the Austrian-Hungarian border, Szijjártó noted that many Hungarians commute to Austria, and maintaining that connection is important for both the Austrian economy and Hungarian employees.

Szijjártó asked all Hungarians abroad to contact the nearest embassy or consulate should they experience difficulties when returning home. Meanwhile, he said Hungary supported the Czech Republic's initiative to set up a European coordination body to help EU citizens returning to their homelands. Currently, 46 Hungarians are quarantined in five countries around the world: 39 in Austria, two in China, two on a cruise ship quarantined in US waters, two in Vietnam and one in Singapore, he said.

GOVT OFFICIAL: SEVERAL HOSPITALS TO BECOME ISOLATION FACILITIES

Several hospitals across the country are being designated as quarantine centres and "epidemic hospitals" in addition to the South Pest Central Hospital's St László unit, Ildikó Horváth, state secretary in charge of health care, told parliament's public welfare committee. Horváth noted that a mobile quarantine hospital is being constructed in Kiskunhalas, in south-eastern Hungary, and the local hospital will be assigned for the same purpose. The hospitals of Ajka (W),

Szekszárd (S), and Miskolc (NE) will be similarly adapted in view of the novel coronavirus epidemic, the state secretary said. The aim is to slow down the spread of the new coronavirus epidemic, she said. The government has introduced its measures in time so there is a chance for slowing down the spread of the virus if people act responsibly, she added.

GPs aged above 65 will not participate in direct patient services and the work will have to be organised in a way to allow only younger doctors to meet patients. A decision has been made to postpone all non-emergency surgeries and the recruitment of more health workers has started. New regulations have been introduced for medicine prescription and specialist medical exams can be postponed, she said.

A large number of acquisitions are under way for protective gear and ventilators and anybody showing symptoms of pneumonia for unknown reasons will be screened for coronavirus, Horváth said. Changes have been made to the laboratory network and in addition to the National Public Health Centre laboratory, seven labs are involved in screenings, she said. Additionally, the Korányi hospital in Budapest is being prepared to provide intensive care to patients in need. Currently 45 health-care workers are in quarantine, she said. The state secretary warned that a few dozen confirmed coronavirus cases could turn into thousands of patients in a week's time, as has been the case in Austria.



PASSENGER RAIL TRAVEL SUSPENDED

Passenger rail services between Hungary and Austria and between Hungary and Ukraine have been suspended due to the Covid-19 epidemic, Hungarian rail company MÁV said. Austria's ÖBB has suspended passenger rail services to Hungary via Szentgotthárd, in south-western Hungary. The Ukrainian border crossing for trains at Záhony-Chop (Csap) has also been closed, Mávinform said. MÁV is offering a total refund for all international tickets, regardless of destination, the website said.

FREIGHT CORRIDORS ASSIGNED FOR TRANSIT TRAFFIC DUE TO CORONAVIRUS

Lorries crossing Hungary to and from neighbouring countries will have to use specially assigned routes and designated fuel stations before departing the country at particular crossings along the Serbian, Ukrainian and Romanian borders, a government official said. The lorries will also have to carry special permits, Tamás Menczer, parliamentary state secretary for communications told parliament's public welfare committee. He noted that international road, rail and air passenger traffic has been suspended, though Ferenc Liszt International Airport is still operating so that Hungarian citizens abroad can return

home. Any Hungarian entering the country from Italy, China, South Korea, Israel and Iran must self-isolate at home for a period of two weeks, he added.

OPPOSITION PROPOSES MEASURES FOR HANDLING CORONAVIRUS ECONOMIC FALLOUT

The opposition Democratic Coalition (DK) has prepared a package of proposals for measures to help companies and individuals financially affected by the novel coronavirus epidemic. DK's deputy chairman Csaba Molnár called on the government to waive employer taxes for ailing companies. Further, deadlines for tax payments as well as collection procedures should be postponed, he said in an online news conference. He also proposed suspending household utility and mortgage payments. Molnár insisted that the government is obliged to "fight tooth and nail" for each job and for all small and medium-sized firms, adding that all DK's proposals have now been put in practice in other countries. Molnár also called for banning layoffs in sectors where activities have been restricted, and he proposed setting up a fund for covering the expenses of impacted businesses. As a first step, employers should be let off labour-related contribution payments in March and April, Molnár said, adding that the measure should be extended if necessary. DK also wants VAT and business tax payments due in March

and April to be postponed until at least the autumn. Molnár said that his party's proposals could be financed through re-allocations from a total 150 billion forints (EUR 450m) budgeted for state communications in 2020.

Meanwhile, the Socialist Party said foreclosures of property for people who default on their mortgages should be suspended. The Socialists propose a payment of pension premiums and a pension increase with retroactive effect, Lajos Korózs told a press conference. Home care services and social support should be strengthened and in-person cheque payments at the post office should also be suspended, he said. Socialist deputy leader László Szakács said that mortgage foreclosures should be suspended because courts have been closed and therefore mortgage holders would be unable to seek legal remedy.

COE REPORT: HUNGARY HAS ACTED ON PRISON RECOMMENDATIONS

Hungary has acted on the recommendations of experts of the Council of Europe (CoE) regarding prison conditions, related practices and overcrowding, according to the Strasbourg body's Committee for the Prevention of Torture. The committee said it trusted that the Hungarian authorities would continue to improve prison conditions and the daily life of prisoners. The report said that whereas conditions were generally adequate, it expressed concern about the length of

extensions to the custody of prisoners awaiting trial. The committee also called for legislation on isolation to be changed, saying that this should be limited to a maximum of 14 days for disciplinary purposes. It also said that inmates should undergo stronger health checks.

The committee said that inmates had not reported any instances of violence during its investigation, but delegation members were told of excessive force and racist action by police. Hungary, it said, had made advances in preventing the ill-treatment of prisoners by adopting new prosecution laws and regulations. But treatment of inmates during questioning and those serving long sentences needed further improvement, it added. Referring to juvenile facilities in Kecskemét, in southern Hungary, and Tököl, in Pest County, the report said violence between prisoners remained a serious problem and that housing conditions were inadequate.

Meanwhile, on the subject of immigration, the CoE officials said that since their visit in 2017, Hungary failed to take effective measures to prevent Hungarian police from brutally treating

deportees at the border with Serbia. Also, based on information given by the Hungarian authorities in 2018, it was clear that legal protections of deportees who complained about their forced removal was still lacking.

HALF OF COMPANIES IN HUNGARY CONTINGENCY PLANNING

Half of the 9,000 companies that have responded so far to a survey by the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MKIK) concerning their response to the novel coronavirus have indicated that they are putting contingency measures in place. More than 15,000 companies responded to questions concerning how the virus impacts their businesses, the chamber's head, László Parragh, told public television. Foreign-owned multinationals typically have plans in place while smaller, Hungarian-owned companies are struggling to handle the problem. Fully one-third of companies have the wherewithal to operate home offices, the survey found. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán recently asked the chamber to survey its members so as to help the

government shape policies for sectors hardest hit by the virus.

HONDURAN NATIONAL ARRESTED IN HUNGARY FOR EPIDEMIC-RELATED FRAUD

A Honduran national has been arrested in Hungary for using the Covid-19 pandemic to defraud a US company of nearly 100,000 US dollars, by promising to deliver 220 million face masks, the head of the Budapest Prosecutor's Office said. The 35-year-old Honduran national and his accomplices used the credentials of an existing Hungarian company to commit the fraud, unbeknownst to the company, Tibor Ibolya said. The suspect and his unknown accomplices asked for, and received, nearly 100,000 US dollars as an advance on the masks. When they asked for a further eight million forints (EUR 23,000), the US company contacted the police, the statement said. The police questioned the man on suspicion of fraud committed as part of a criminal organisation, and a Budapest court ordered him to be taken into custody, Ibolya said.