

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Zoltán Balogh

Dancer rehearsing in self-imposed quarantine

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

Govt-ordered curfew takes effect

Hungary switches to daylight saving time

Hungary marks Earth Hour

TOP STORY

HUNGARY INTRODUCES CURFEW

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has announced a curfew in Hungary, between March 28 and April 11. People are only allowed to leave their homes to go to work or to run essential errands, he said in an interview to public broadcaster Kossuth Rádió.

Grocery shops and pharmacies will be open to people above 65 years of age between 9 and 12 every day, he said. Others will not be allowed in those shops during that period, he said. The restriction is a somewhat stricter version of the curfew introduced in the German state of Bavaria, he said, calling the measure "sensible and proportionate".

Meanwhile, regarding Hungarian economic protection measures, he said: "Now the people come first, not the economy." At the same time, the government, he said, is already working on a plan to protect and restart the economy, adding that the action plan will be made public in the first or second week of April. He paid tribute to health-care and law-enforcement staff, and praised people who work in grocery shops, pharmacies and factories. "I thank all Hungarians because if there is a war – and this is a war situation – the hinterland matters just as much as the front line," he said, adding that the country was in an orderly state. Orbán said the aim was to slow the spread of the virus. To get rid of it altogether would require a vaccine, he added.

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ORBÁN: CURFEW MEANT TO PROTECT MOST VULNERABLE GROUPS

The curfew entering into effect on March 28 in response to the novel coronavirus epidemic aims to “separate the most vulnerable elderly population from young people in a bearable way”, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in an interview to public broadcaster Kossuth Rádió. Orbán said he expects the curfew to reduce person-to-person contact and in turn, slow the spread of the virus. Citing survey findings, Orbán said the restrictions introduced so far have been successful, as Hungarians have reduced their number of in-person meetings to one-tenth of what it had been before the outbreak. The decree on the curfew lists the various reasons for which people will be allowed to leave their homes. The government has done its best to define these in a way so that “life remains liveable”, Orbán said.

These reasons include, among others, parents taking their children to school if they are unable to find anyone to look after them at home, he said. Also, people will still be allowed to go outside, but close physical contact with others is still discouraged, the prime minister said, adding that these rules were more relaxed when it comes to family members. Violation of the rules will count as a misdemeanour, Orbán said, adding, however, that police officers are asked to help people comply with the curfew rather than enforce it.

Orbán said so-called hospital commanders appointed by the government will head all Hungarian hospitals from Monday. Doctors, he said, will still decide on medical matters, but compliance with the stated epidemiological regulations will be overseen by the commanders. Also, the uniformed hospital commanders will be in charge of supplies and staff management, he said, adding that hospitals would be able to bear the burden if the system operated smoothly in the next few weeks or months.

“What the country is undertaking is a military, combat action plan,” he said. “If this goes well in the next two weeks, the number of transmissions will be reduced massively and the epidemic may slow down.” He noted that typically 80% carry the virus without any symptoms. At the same time, 15-20% become ill. Some of the 2 million or so in Hungary who are likely to contract the virus will need to be hospitalised, he said. The elderly and people with serious underlying illnesses will need intensive care, he added. If this were to take place all at the same time, Hungary’s health-care system would become over-burdened, he said, adding that at the height of the epidemic, Hungarian health care would be over-burdened ten times its peak capacity in terms of beds, ventilators, doctors and nurses. This is why the policy is to slow transmission down, he said. The prime minister said protecting doctors was among the top tasks.

Concerning Hungary’s domestic political situation, the prime minister

said: “Politics isn’t what we need right now.” Instead, Hungary needs unity, “because the more of us unite, the more lives we can save.” Orbán said the current crisis was not about power, but rather human lives.

Orbán said that because the government had not received the support it needed for certain measures in parliament this week, some of those measures had now become uncertain. These, he said, included entry bans. Such restrictions, however, have now been extended because “we can’t leave the country unprotected, even if the opposition refuses to contribute to making quick decisions.”

The rule on university closures is also set to expire, but rectors have been asked to keep the institutions closed, he noted. Commenting on criticisms of Hungary’s epidemic response bill from the European Union, Orbán said: “They can investigate [the bill] for all I care. Good luck... with it!” He said there were situations when there was no room for politeness, and that he had made it clear to those in the EU “picking on Hungary” because of the bill that “now is not the time for being a smart aleck about legal and theoretical issues”. “There’s an epidemic, we have to save lives.”

HUNGARY CONFIRMED CORONAVIRUS INFECTIONS REACH 300

The number of people confirmed to be infected with novel coronavirus in Hungary has grown to 300, with more Hungarian citizens having



tested positive, the government website koronavirus.gov.hu said. Of the 300 confirmed cases in the country, 10 are Iranian, 2 are British, one is Kazakh, another Vietnamese, and the remaining 286 are Hungarian, the website said.

The number of people confirmed as having recovered from the virus has risen from 28 to 34, it added. So far, ten people have died from the virus. Altogether 100 people are in quarantine and a total of 9,275 test samples having been taken. The epidemic in Hungary is at the stage of group infections spread in communities, the website said. Infected people can be found everywhere in the country and anyone could be already infected, it added.

CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER ISSUES DECREE BANNING INTL PASSENGER TRANSPORT INTO HUNGARY

Hungary's chief medical officer has issued a decree banning with immediate effect all civilian passenger transport by air, rail or bus into Hungary, as well as the entry of non-Hungarian citizens into the country. The decree was issued a few hours before the expiration of the government's decrees under special powers on the same issues. The decree also banned students from attending universities. Hungarians entering the country were obliged to undergo medical examination. The decree

allowed a humanitarian corridor to be left open for foreigners travelling across Hungary into neighbouring countries, and made allowances for drivers in international freight transport.

POLICE READY TO FULFIL CURFEW-RELATED DUTIES, SAYS OPERATIVE BOARD

Hungary's police force is ready to fulfil its duties concerning the curfew restrictions entering into effect from Saturday, the operative board coordinating the response to the novel coronavirus epidemic said. The police will aim to encourage people to comply with the restrictions by imposing "reassuring, helpful and empathetic" measures in public spaces, Róbert Kiss, an official of the board's emergency centre, told an online press conference. Police will continue to monitor compliance with quarantine rules, he said. The authorities have ordered home quarantine in 5,032 cases so far and have conducted more than 39,000 inspections, Kiss added.

The data, he said, showed that Hungarians have understood the need to comply with quarantine regulations. At the same time, the authorities have had to fine 32 people for violations and have filed misdemeanor charges against 163, he said.

With the state of emergency ordered on March 11 coming to an end, restrictions on shops will be changing, he noted. Kiss said the authorities had fined 25 shop owners for violating the

restrictions and filed misdemeanour charges against 44.

Police are still patrolling traffic at the border, he noted, adding that some border crossings were dealing with minor congestions.

In response to a question, he said Hungary could theoretically import protective equipment from any part of the world but has so far only be able to from the East. The government is on the lookout for other options, he added.

Asked about Hungary's supply of medical oxygen, Kiss said the operative board has made sure to delegate operative bodies comprising military personnel to the companies responsible for medical oxygen production.

Concerning care for the elderly population, he said local councils could enlist the help of the civil guard to ensure that elderly residents have a steady supply of basic foodstuffs.

Cecília Müller, the chief medical officer, told the same press conference that the measures served to protect the entire population. The curfew is meant to further slow the spread of the virus and to protect groups most vulnerable to it, she said.

Müller said that whenever possible, those over the age of 65 should ask their family members or the local government to help them with their shopping.

Meanwhile, at a separate press conference, Human Resources Minister Miklós Kásler praised the efforts of Hungary's health-

care workers in their treatment of Covid-19 patients and overall handling of the epidemic.

Hungary, in a European comparison, "has been very fortunate" in the first phase of the epidemic, Kásler said, pointing out that the rise in infections had been delayed by 2-3 weeks compared with the rest of the continent. The minister attributed this to the preventive measures imposed by the government ahead of time and the health-care sector's "organised reaction" to the spread of the virus.

At the current stage of group infections spread in communities, Hungary will have to spend the next 2-3 weeks concentrating on preparing the health-care system for the stage of mass infections, Kásler said.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: TWO TURKIC COUNCIL COUNTRIES SEND PROTECTIVE GEAR TO HUNGARY

Consignments of protective gear and material for manufacturing face masks will soon arrive from two Turkic Council countries, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said. Turkey green-lighted a consignment of eight tonnes of textiles for face masks, and Uzbekistan offered 150,000 face masks after Hungary turned to the council for help, he said in a video posted on Facebook. Hungary earlier ordered hundreds of tonnes of protective equipment,

which is expected to be delivered in the coming weeks, he said. Szijjártó thanked the Turkish and Uzbek governments for their help.

KOVÁCS: PANDEMIC SHOULD INSPIRE GREATER SOLIDARITY

The state secretary responsible for international communication and relations has called for greater solidarity "as we all face the most serious pandemic in a century, when governments everywhere are battling an unknown enemy and doing our best to protect the population against the spread of the virus."

Zoltán Kovács said in a blog entry that the "vociferous criticisms" of the Hungarian government's coronavirus defense bill "come as nothing new. Even so, it's disappointing and pathetic," he said. After "a decade of ... malicious and inaccurate reporting on Hungary ... we still have a democracy, a free media, a boisterous opposition and, prior to the present coronavirus crisis, one of the strongest economies in the EU," he said. "After what we've seen over the last ten years, I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. But somehow I thought – as we all face the most serious pandemic in a century, when governments everywhere are battling an unknown enemy and doing our best to protect the population against the spread of the virus and to save lives – I guess I hoped that this time we'd see a little more solidarity," he said.

SOCIALISTS CALL ON GOVT TO ADVANCE PENSION PAYMENTS

The opposition Socialist Party is calling on the government to advance pensioners their payments early so that as Easter approaches as few elderly as possible are in need of cash. Also, the Socialists propose that pensioners who get less than 100,000 forints (EUR 282) a month should receive a 20,000 forint one-off supplement, Lajos Kórozs, the head of parliament's public welfare committee, told a news conference.

With inflation running high, there should be a pension hike of 6.5%, he said, adding that the supplement normally paid in November should be brought forward to April. Further, health and social workers should be given a 500,000 forint payment, he said. The Socialists are demanding a 32% reduction in gas prices and a 10% reduction in electricity and district heating prices, he said.

BENKŐ: MAINTAINING OPERATION OF ESSENTIAL SERVICES A PRIORITY

Maintaining operations of essential services in Hungary is a priority, and the armed forces aim to guarantee the security of essential companies accordingly, Defence Minister Tibor Benkő said. Benkő told parliament's defence committee

that operative bodies comprising military personnel, police officers and disaster management experts are working with 86 companies in the health-care, pharmaceutical, food production, infocommunications, transport, energy and water management sectors to enforce virus containment efforts.

Army Commander Ferenc Korom told the committee there are two confirmed cases of Covid-19 within the armed forces, an employee of the Honvéd military hospital and another who recently returned from a training in Germany.

Socialist committee member Tamás Harangozó asked the minister whether the number of soldiers deployed had reached 3,000, which would require a report to the committee. Benkő said 1,200 soldiers are working on containment efforts and 800 are deployed to the southern border. Others are securing the humanitarian corridor maintained for foreigners in transit to other countries, he said.

HUNGARY JOBLESS RATE 3.5% IN DEC-FEB

Hungary's three-month rolling average jobless rate was 3.5% in December-February, up 0.1 of a percentage point from the previous three-month period, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. The rate, which covers unemployment among those between the ages of 15 and 74, was down 0.1 of a percentage point from the same period twelve months earlier. In absolute terms, there were 163,700 unemployed, 3,400 more than in the previous three-month period. But there were 4,500 fewer jobless compared with the same period the previous year.

GOVT OFFICIAL: RELATIONS WITH HUNGARIANS ACROSS BORDER MAINTAINED DURING PANDEMIC

Contacts with Hungarians living across the borders are being maintained during the novel coronavirus

pandemic, the state secretary for relations with Hungarian communities abroad has said. In a statement, Árpád János Potápi said state-funded programmes for Hungarian communities across the borders are being moved online or postponed to the second half of the year.

The Határtalanul programme that funds school trips for over 100,000 students is being postponed to October, Potápi said. Students who work with Hungarian diasporas worldwide with grants from the Kőrösi Csoma and Petőfi programmes will continue to work remotely with the help of mentors, he said. The deadlines for tenders and competitions are being pushed back to ease the burden on applicants, Potápi said. In the present critical situation, the priority is to protect "the lives and health of those around us and of ourselves, and thereby to preserve the nation." Potápi called on Hungarians across the borders to "take the danger seriously, take care of the elderly around you, and stay at home."