

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Ános Vajda

Traffic hindered by snow-storm in north-eastern Hungary

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

Stats office releases Jan inflation data

TOP STORY

GOVT TO INTRODUCE IMMUNITY CERTIFICATES

The government will introduce certificates of immunity from Covid for people who have been inoculated against or recovered from the disease, the prime minister's chief of staff said.

The certificate will be issued to people who have received the second shot of the vaccine, indicating the date on which the second jab was administered, Gergely Gulyás told a weekly press briefing. The document will not have an expiry date as there is not enough information available as to how long immunity lasts after a person has been vaccinated, he said. Further, another kind of certificate will note relevant dates such as a recovered Covid patient's release from hospital or the tenth day after their first positive PCR test result. Both kinds of certificate will be provided free of charge, he said. Alternatively, a certificate based on results from a certified laboratory will be valid for four months after the lab results are issued, Gulyás said, adding that in this case applicants will be charged a fee for the document. "We hope this document, too, will help get things back to normal as soon as possible," he said, adding that the government had yet to decide what sort of exemptions certificate-holders will be entitled to.

FIRST SINOPHARM SHIPMENT EXPECTED NEXT WEEK

Hungary expects to take delivery of the first shipment of China's Sinopharm vaccine next week, Gergely Gulyás, the prime minister's chief of staff, told a briefing. The first batch contains 500,000 doses, he said, adding that Hungary's public health authority is yet to assess the vaccine. So far, more than 30 million people have been inoculated with the Sinopharm vaccine worldwide, including ethnic Hungarians living in Serbia, he said. Hungary is also set to receive 200,000 doses of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine this month.

Although the rollout of the jabs procured by the European Union was still taking too long, next week Hungary expects to resume inoculating people in the oldest age group as well as those under the age of 60 with chronic illnesses, he said. Vaccinations will also resume at social institutions where they had to be suspended, he added.

More than 300,000 people will have received their first dose of a Covid-19 vaccine in Hungary by the end of Thursday, with 294,624 people having received their first Covid shots by Wednesday and more than 117,000 having been fully inoculated. Some 30,000 elderly people will be inoculated by their general practitioners using the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, Gulyás said. Those

not under the age of 75 not suffering a chronic illnesses will be inoculated using the Sputnik V jab at hospitals, he said. People below the age of 60 with chronic illnesses are being inoculated using the AstraZeneca vaccine, he added. Hungary has also asked the EU to speed up its vaccine deliveries, which the commission has promised to do, Gulyás said.

The PM's chief of staff also said that though Hungary had got the second wave of the pandemic under control thanks to its restrictions introduced on Nov. 11, the pandemic was now in a phase of stagnation while the rest of Europe was experiencing a third wave. The UK variant of the virus is spreading more easily in Hungary as well, he said, adding that this could lead to another uptick in cases.

Gulyás said the consumer protection authority has launched an investigation into the practices of the International Vaccination Centre after it was revealed that it had accepted downpayments for Covid vaccines that it did not have in stock.

He said that under the most optimistic scenario regarding the vaccination campaign, more than two million people could be inoculated by the end of March provided that all of the scheduled vaccine shipments are delivered on time.

Meanwhile, government spokeswoman Alexandra Szentkirályi said the government has earmarked the necessary funding for its latest National Consultation public survey concerning when to lift coronavirus

restrictions. The survey will be accessible online at the website vakcinainfo.gov.hu in a few days.

GULYÁS: WAGE SUBSIDY DISBURSEMENTS SPEEDED UP

Gergely Gulyás, the Prime Minister's chief of staff, said the government has speeded up payments of wage subsidies to companies, adding that employers have applied for a total 40 billion forints, of which the government offices so far approved nearly 36 billion forints and paid out 35.5 billion.

Asked about a proposal by the opposition Socialist Party to give 10,000 forint (EUR 28) vouchers to those who get themselves vaccinated, Gulyás noted that the vaccines are purchased using public funds and are administered free of charge. "The demand that people who receive an expensive vaccine for free be given money defies common sense," he said, adding that the proposal, however, was "only one-tenth as insane" as the opposition Momentum Movement's suggestion that people be given 100,000 forints.

Concerning a decision by several local councils to ease their rules on mask-wearing, Gulyás said it was their job to determine what kinds of rules were necessary, adding that the government respected these decisions. He said the government is expected to decide on a potential easing of lockdown measures in two

weeks' time based on the results of the National Consultation public survey and case numbers.

Gulyás said the reopening of the borders was expected to be the last step in the process of lifting Hungary's lockdown measures, even though every country has an interest in restarting the tourism industry.

Asked about government compensation for local councils affected by lower business tax revenues, Gulyás said he was scheduled to soon meet the mayors of county-seat cities. Asked if the government supported the Budapest municipality's package aimed at rebooting the hospitality industry after restrictions are lifted, Gulyás said the municipal council was "on the right track" but the package "is only a small step". The government is preparing several measures aimed at helping the sector in addition to waiving the rent payable to the state or local council for premises, he said.

On another subject, Gulyás dismissed as "fake news" media reports that Budapest would only be given a yearly 700 million forints in EU funds in the 2021-27 funding cycle. Budapest will receive up to 1,000 billion forints in development funds, he said, adding that the capital had been allocated more than 20% of the available funds in the previous cycle. Concerning a letter by the mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony, urging consultations between municipalities and the central government over utilisation

of European recovery funds, Gulyás said that the government was "planning the next development cycle in cooperation with local governments". He added that the mayor has the power "to convene the Municipal Public Developments Council at any time".

Meanwhile, Gulyás said the government "had nothing to do" with the decision to strip commercial Klubrádió of its broadcast licence, noting that the matter had been decided in court based on violations "that not even Klubrádió contested". "All such cases offer an opportunity for defamation ... against Hungary," he added.

Also, Gulyás said parliament was expected to reconsider the law on plastic waste earlier criticised by the Constitutional Court.

On the subject of an initiative by the Hungarian Olympic Committee to bid to hold the Summer Olympics in Hungary in 2032, Gulyás denied the government had anything to do with it.

Concerning planned regulations of social media, Gulyás said the aim was to keep Facebook users' personal data safe and ensure that the right to limit freedom of speech lay exclusively with the state. He also welcomed Facebook's payment of 3.8 billion forints in advertising tax to the central budget in 2017-18 as "a great achievement".

On the subject of higher education, he noted that a bill concerning changes to the

operational structure of universities will be tabled in parliament in the spring.

On the topic of delinquencies in national insurance contribution payments, Gulyás said people with six months of arrears have been offered the chance to pay them in instalments, but those who don't take up the opportunity before the Feb. 12 deadline will be stripped of their national insurance numbers that entitle them to free health care. Around 70,000 people have fallen behind with their payments, while "several tens of thousands" have now settled their debt.

Gulyás said that a contract with Budapest's prestigious Gundel restaurant under which Gundel provided daily meals to the prime minister's offices had been terminated by the restaurant rather than the government, adding that in future the Hungarian army will provide the relevant catering.

FIDESZ MEPS TURN TO EU'S TOP DIPLOMAT OVER UKRAINE

Ruling Fidesz MEPs have turned to Josep Borrell, the European Union's foreign policy chief, concerning Ukraine's enactment of measures that they say hurt the country's ethnic Hungarian community and other "offences" committed against them. The Fidesz-Christian Democrat MEP group said in a statement that, alongside ethnic Hungarian MEPs,

they have sent a written query to Borrell calling attention to the “systemic infringement of the rights of Transcarpathian Hungarians”. In the query, the MEPs noted instances of hate speech in Ukrainian media against the Hungarian community, their intimidation by paramilitary groups, the arson attack on the headquarters of the Hungarian Cultural Federation in Transcarpathia (KMKSZ) in 2018, and a series of raids by the Ukrainian authorities of the premises of ethnic Hungarian institutions last year.

The MEPs said Borrell expressed concern over the treatment of ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine in a letter of response. The European Union continues to defend the rights of national minorities, Fidesz cited Borrell as saying, adding that he called on Ukraine to respect minority rights. The EU calls on Ukraine to work closely with Hungary on finding a joint solution to the situation that is based on European values and principles and in line with its international obligations and commitments, they cited Borrell as saying.

Fidesz welcomed Borrell’s response, saying it was “encouraging” that the EU’s top diplomat was committed to the principle of protecting minority rights. Fidesz however expects the offences committed against Transcarpathian Hungarians to be addressed through specific steps and for Ukraine to be held accountable for the commitments it made in its association agreement with the EU, they added.

V4 PREMIERS TO MEET EUROPEAN COUNCIL PRESIDENT IN KRAKOW ON FEB. 17

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán will travel to Krakow on February 17 to participate in a summit of the Visegrad Group’s heads of government, Orbán’s press chief said. Polish media has reported citing EU sources that European Council President Charles Michel has accepted the V4’s invitation and will attend the event. The Visegrad Group was formed on February 15, 1991, at a high-level meeting in the Hungarian town of Visegrad. Its six-month rotating presidency will be taken over by Hungary from Poland on June 30.

97 COVID FATALITIES, 1,862 NEW INFECTIONS

Fully 97 Covid patients, generally elderly and suffering from an underlying illness, died over the past 24 hours, while 1,862 new infections were officially registered, bringing the total number of infected to 381,875, koronavirus.gov.hu said. The death toll has risen to 13,444, while 287,134 people have made a recovery. The number of active infections has declined to 81,297, while there are 3,799 hospitalised Covid patients, 299 on a ventilator. Altogether 21,456 people are in official home quarantine, and the number of tests carried out has risen to 3,318,850. Hungary began rolling out the coronavirus vaccine in

December. So far, 294,624 people have received their first jab, and 117,368 have been fully inoculated.

The government has extended coronavirus-related restrictions until March 1.

Most infections have been registered in Budapest (70,847) and Pest County (47,680) so far, followed by the counties of Hajdú-Bihar (21,520), Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén (21,399) and Győr-Moson-Sopron (21,210). The county least affected by the infection is Tolna (8,449).

Several indicators of the coronavirus epidemic in Hungary are steadily rising, the chief medical officer said told a briefing. Like in many other European countries, the appearance of the UK variant had exacerbated virus transmissions, she said. “We had 1,862 more registered infections yesterday, which while relatively slight, could herald a faster rate of increase if the more infectious UK mutation gains ground,” she said, adding that measures to contain virus transmissions were still a top priority.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY TO COMPLETE PIPELINE FOR AZERI GAS BY OCT

Hungary will complete the missing section of the pipeline through which Azerbaijani gas is set to arrive in the country, Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Peter Szijjártó said told an online session of the ministerial advisory panel of the Southern Gas Corridor. He hailed the completion

of the corridor and called for the soonest possible construction of the missing national sections in Europe. The Serbian section between the Hungarian and Bulgarian borders is already in place, he noted, and he called for the section between Bulgaria and Greece to be completed as soon as possible. Szijjártó welcomed the potential to increase the corridor's capacity and deliver new Azeri sources of supply in 2023. The minister has instructed Hungary's electricity and gas works to start talks with Azeri oil company Socar on the contractual arrangements by which Hungary can buy Azeri gas. Szijjártó also welcomed the new cooperation agreement signed with Turkmenistan on joint prospecting projects on the Caspian Sea, which may pave the way for additional gas supplies through the corridor. The minister noted that Hungarian oil and gas company MOL is the biggest central European investor in Azerbaijan, and holds the third biggest portfolio in Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli, that country's biggest gas field.

EC PROJECTS 4.0% GDP GROWTH IN HUNGARY IN 2021

The European Commission projects Hungary's GDP will grow by 4% this year and 5% in 2022. The EC modified its estimate for last year's GDP decline to 5.3% from 6.3%. It said industry, construction and retail sales remained strong in October

and November but the rebound was interrupted by the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic which led to more restrictions. An assumed easing of restrictions could lead to a quick recovery from mid-2021, it added.

GOVT SIGNS STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH SIEMENS

The government has signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Siemens Energy, the company announced, adding that they would launch a one billion forint (EUR 2.8m) investment project in Hungary. Péter Szijjártó, the minister of foreign affairs and trade, said that the government is contributing 294 million forints to the project. Under the partnership agreement, Siemens Energy will build closer cooperation with Hungary's education system and further its ties with Hungarian suppliers, Szijjártó said. The company's new development project will facilitate application of the latest technologies and help preserve 1,400 jobs, the minister added. He also said that Siemens Energy had one of its largest bases in Budapest, a major manufacturer of turbine blades.

FIRST TEN TURKISH GIDRANS INAUGURATED AT N HUNGARY ARMY BASE

The first ten Gidran 4x4 armoured vehicles ordered by Hungary were presented by the Turkish

manufacturer at a ceremony at the Hungarian army base in Tata, in northern Hungary. Another 40 Gidrans will be delivered by Nurol Makina to the base, Defence Minister Tibor Benkő said at the event. Engin Aycol, the CEO of Nurol Makina, said at the ceremony that Hungary is the first EU country to put a Gidran fleet into service in its armed forces. "Our company is ready to invest in Hungary and set up a local unit," he said. Hungary announced in December 2020 that it is putting into service more than 300 Gidrans, some of which will be manufactured in Kaposvár, in south-western Hungary.

KSH: GUEST NIGHTS DROP BY 92.7% IN DEC

The number of guest nights in Hungary fell by an annual 92.7% to 147,000 in December as the pandemic continued to impact the tourism industry, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. Nights spent by domestic tourists fell by 89.0% to 104,000, foreign guest nights plunged by 96.0% to 44,000. The number of foreign travellers in Hungary was around 14,000, while there were 33,000 domestic travellers. KSH noted that after Nov. 10, hotels and lodgings were not allowed to receive tourists, only travellers arriving on business, economic or educational purposes under restrictions introduced to contain the second wave of the pandemic in the country.

EXIM: HUNGARIAN TECHNOLOGY TO BE USED FOR TREATING WASTE WATER IN GHANA

Hungarian technology will be used for treating waste water in two regions of Ghana within two years, EXIM, which funds the project, said. The Pureco-Unit Consortium is in charge of preparing the plans and building the waste water facilities for the Josping Group, one of Ghana's largest privately-owned conglomerates. EXIM is providing funding for the buyer in line with a contract signed at the end of January. In addition to Hungarian technology, Ghana will also receive training to operate the new system. Currently the affected regions treat only 10% of waste water properly, but thanks to the investment they will have capacity to treat all the waste water generated, EXIM said.

ORBÁN SENDS CONDOLENCES TO POET ÁRPÁD FARKAS'S FAMILY

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has extended his condolences in a letter to the family of ethnic Hungarian poet Árpád Farkas, who died aged 77 and was buried on Wednesday. The letter

was published online by Transylvanian daily Háromszék, of which Farkas was chief editor for nearly 20 years. In his letter, Orbán referred to the deceased poet as a "watch-fire for Háromszék, for Transylvania and for all Hungarians". Farkas, during Romania's communist era and after that country's revolution "refused to accept any order other than which followed from the eternal commandments of community with the Hungarian language, the homeland and our ancestors", the letter said.

HUNGARY, SLOVENIA POLICE THWART ILLEGAL SALE OF RARE SCRIPTS

Hungarian police in cooperation with Slovenian officers prevented a gang from selling stolen, ancient religious scripts believed to be of Middle Eastern origin, police.hu said. According to the website, the suspects -- two Hungarians, two Slovenians, and two Croats -- were hoping to receive some one billion forints (EUR 2.8m) from a foreign buyer in Ljubljana. Acting on information from Hungarian authorities, the Slovenian police detained the suspects in Ljubljana last August, and seized three books. Subsequent scrutiny of the evidence revealed that the books were

"forgeries appearing to be religious scripts" put together using precious original components, such as pages from the 7th century, as well as other scripts from the 12th-16th centuries. The original parts of the books are considered protected cultural heritage under international agreements, police.hu said.

HUNGARIAN FILM ARCHIVES SET UP IN MOSCOW TRETYAKOV GALLERY

A Hungarian film archives has been set up in Moscow's prestigious State Tretyakov Gallery. The collection containing 134 Hungarian titles was inaugurated in a ceremony on Wednesday evening. At the event, Hungarian Ambassador Norbert Konkoly presented the filmrolls to Zelfira Tregulova, Tretyakov's director. The archives is a joint project by Tretyakov and the Hungarian cultural centre in Moscow aimed at promoting Hungarian cinema. The gallery's film theatre will screen a Hungarian film every other week over the next year. The programme opened on Wednesday evening with Zoltán Huszárík's Csontváry on 20th century Hungarian avant-garde painter Tivadar Csontváry Kosztká.