

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Zoltán Balogh

Budapest headquarters of International Investment Bank inaugurated

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

Innovation, technology minister holds presser on Börögöd airport in C Hungary

TOP STORY

ORBÁN CALLS ON PUBLIC TO GET JOB

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán encouraged Hungarians to get themselves inoculated against the coronavirus, warning that the country was on the cusp of a third wave of infections.

With a third wave of the pandemic hitting the country, people should make a rational, rather than an emotional decision on getting vaccinated, as it could even cost them their lives, Orbán told public broadcaster Kossuth Rádió. "I ask everyone to register and go and get themselves inoculated and if possible, accept whichever vaccine they are offered," he said. Orbán also said that some 120,000 people filled out the government's National Consultation survey on reopening the country on the first day. The responsibility for such decision obviously lies with the government, he said, adding that the best decision would be made if more and more people had their voices heard. "If we can fend off a third wave, we can reopen the country." Orbán said Hungary had the biggest stock of effective Covid vaccines out of all EU member states. The prime minister said that by the end of May, Hungary can have 3.5 million more people vaccinated than an EU country of similar size "because we don't rely solely on the EU's slow vaccine distribution but also use our own resources to procure more" jobs.

ORBÁN: HUNGARY AHEAD IN 'RACE FOR VACCINES'

In an interview with public broadcaster Kossuth Rádió, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán noted that Péter Szijjártó, the minister of foreign affairs and trade, had predicted a "race for vaccines" as far back as November and had recommended that Hungary hold talks on purchasing vaccines from all over the world to get ahead of a projected vaccine shortage. This is why Hungary entered into talks with Russia and China, Orbán said, adding that he "doesn't really care what the others have to say about this" as Hungary "always has to be one step ahead of them". He pointed out that "the Germans and everyone else" were now working to procure doses of the Russian vaccine and said he expected other countries to begin authorising the Chinese jab as well. Asked when Hungary could begin using China's Sinopharm vaccine, Orbán said he had been told by the chief medical officer that analysis of the jab was "going well". The prime minister warned, however, that Hungary was facing "a moment of danger" as it sees a steep rise in coronavirus cases and overall deteriorating epidemiological trends. Hungary registered 3,093 new Covid-19 cases and 110 deaths on Thursday, Orbán said. "Our fate will be decided by whether the vaccination curve or the infection curve will rise faster," the prime minister said.

If vaccinations can outpace the rise in cases "then we will save lives" but if they fail to keep up with the third wave of infections "we will lose lives," Orbán said. He praised the efforts of Hungary's "exceptionally strong" health-care system over the past year, saying it had saved many lives and would again withstand the pressure posed by the pandemic. He added that the health-care system had plenty of reserves, and would even be able to handle a sudden influx of 20,000 Covid patients if it became necessary.

Orbán said 391,821 people had already received at least their first shot and the number will soon reach 441,000. This will be followed by a "huge jump" because 650,000 people will get inoculated over 7-10 days, he added. By early March, 1,225 million people will have been inoculated and by April, the number will reach 2,582 million, Orbán said, adding that everyone registered for vaccination will have received it by Easter. People ready to be inoculated will be told which vaccine is available and if they refuse it, "we will assure them that they do not lose their place in the line" and they will be notified at a later date, when the vaccine they want becomes available, Orbán said.

In response to opposition criticism, he said the left-wing was following "a school of power, from Lenin through Rákosi and through János Kádár, it is a political tradition ... when it comes to power, the left-wing knows no mercy". "If the left-wing believes that

it can gain power more easily if the right-wing national government's vaccination programme is unsuccessful and the handling of the epidemic is unsuccessful, then they will pronounce just that", he said. The left-wing has openly rejected cooperation "but they have gone too far" because human lives are now at stake, he said.

ORBÁN: VISEGRAD GROUP COOPERATION BENEFITS ALL

Commenting on the 30th anniversary of Visegrad Group cooperation, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán told public broadcaster Kossuth Rádió that "if we join forces, we all benefit and get richer". Hungary and Poland must be connected by as many high-capacity energy links and transport networks through Slovakia as possible, he said, adding that this was a basic economic strategy interest for Hungary. A road link to Kosice (Kassa) is expected to be ready by the end of this year but Poland is still far away from there, so the next stretch will have to be built, possibly in a joint project, he said. For a long time, "we were defending Europe" from external threats but the situation has changed because western Europe has allowed cultures with non-Christian roots to enter, he said. "We built the fence and stopped migration" but this type of pressure is now arriving not through central Europe anymore, he said. However, any "clever western European politician" understands that strong central Europe is also a strategic interest for western Europe, he added.

KÖVÉR HOLDS TALKS WITH CHINESE COUNTERPART

Speaker of Parliament László Kövér discussed bilateral ties, relations between China and the eastern and central European countries and the fight against Covid-19 in a videoconference with Li Zhanshu, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China.

In the call, Kövér thanked Li for the medical equipment China provided to Hungary during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic, parliament's press chief told MTI. Kövér also thanked China for selling some 5 million doses of its Covid vaccine to Hungary, of which the first 550,000 arrived in Budapest earlier this week. Li in turn thanked Kövér for Hungary having been among the first countries to offer help to China in curbing the pandemic.

The speaker lauded China's success in containing the pandemic using its own resources, noting that this had also required timely measures from the government and discipline from the public. "We have a difficult year behind us and an uncertain one ahead of us, but I am hopeful that the coming year will again be one of upward momentum and optimism compared with the last one for both the Chinese and Hungarian people," Kövér said.

Concerning bilateral economic relations, the speaker said the two countries had moved significantly closer to one another over the past decade. Hungary's strategy of opening up to the

East, which has boosted bilateral trade turnover by 25%, and China's Belt and Road initiative have laid the foundations for strategic cooperation, he added.

China was Hungary's biggest foreign investor last year, investing more than 5 billion US dollars in the country, Kövér said, adding that Chinese companies doing business in Hungary employ 16,000 people. Kövér welcomed that trade turnover between China and Hungary increased by more than 20% last year despite the pandemic.

The two speakers also spoke highly of the China-CEE "17+1" cooperation and urged the pursuit of as many joint projects as possible. Kövér said Hungary did not consider the cooperation between China and the CEE countries an alternative to the European Union, but rather a bridge between the EU and China and Asia as a whole through which they could develop models to be put to use by other nations.

Li and Kövér agreed on the need for continued pragmatic cooperation between their countries based on mutual respect for each other's strategic interests and a vow not to interfere in each other's internal affairs.

JUSTICE MINISTER: GOVT READY TO SCRAP LAW PROMPTING INFRINGEMENT PROCEDURE

Hungary is ready to scrap the legislation on foreign-funded NGOs, and has sent a draft amendment to the statute to the European Commission, Justice Minister Judit Varga said

on Friday, reacting to the EC's announcement that it was launching an infringement procedure against Hungary over the matter.

On Thursday, the EC launched an infringement procedure against Hungary for flouting a ruling of the Court of Justice of the European Union concerning its law on civil organisations. In a letter of formal notice to Hungary, the EC called on Hungary to implement the CJEU's ruling of June 2020, in which the court ruled that Hungarian regulation of foreign-funded NGOs violated EU rules on the free movement of capital as well as the fundamental right to protection of personal data and freedom of association.

Varga said on Facebook that once the EC approved the draft, the Hungarian government was ready to submit it to parliament so it could be tabled in the spring session.

The European Commission referred Hungary to the CJEU over legislation accepted in 2017, requiring NGOs to make full disclosure of foreign funding over 7.2 million forints (EUR 208,700).

Referring to the law, Varga said on Friday that the government had "made the funding of NGOs transparent to make it clear which NGOs are trying to exert political pressure on Hungarian public life with foreign support." Although Hungary acted fairly and transparently, the EC launched a "politically motivated procedure" resulting in the CJEU's ruling last June, she said.

Meanwhile, Hungary assured the EU several times that it was ready to comply with the ruling and to take steps to implement it, she said. Dialogue on the matter was ongoing with the EC, she said. "While some opposition politicians are rejoicing for the initiative of an unfair infringement proceeding against their country in Brussels, the Hungarian government is doing its job," Varga said. "It is time for [Brussels] to do their part of the work as well," she said.

BENKŐ: HUNGARY SUPPORTS MAJORITY OF SECRETARY-GENERAL'S PROPOSALS TO NATO 2030

Hungary supports most elements of a package of proposals submitted by the NATO secretary-general in connection with the NATO 2030 initiative which serves to strengthen the alliance's effectiveness and internal cohesion, Defence Minister Tibor Benkő said. Benkő told a video conference of NATO defence ministers that Hungary's armed-forces development programme was fully in line with NATO's capability development targets, honvedelem.hu said. He added that thanks to the government's continued support, Hungary has been able to increase defence spending in line with its original plans, despite the coronavirus pandemic. This will contribute to the balanced share of burdens in the alliance, which is an important pillar of transatlantic relations, he

said. Benkő highlighted the launch of a central-European multinational command in Székesfehérvár, which he said was a significant success not only for Hungary but also for strengthening security in the region. State secretary of defence István Szabó told the meeting that Hungary contributed significant forces to NATO's international operations. Hungary remains dedicated to security in the Middle East, Afghanistan and the Western Balkans, he said, adding that Hungary is increasing its presence in the KFOR mission in Kosovo, calling it a matter of "historical importance" that KFOR will have a Hungarian commander from November.

CENTRIST DEMOCRAT INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNS HUNGARIAN LEFT'S ALLIANCE WITH JOBBIK

The Centrist Democrat International (CDI) has adopted a resolution condemning the Hungarian left-wing parties' cooperation with nationalist Jobbik and calling for zero tolerance of far-right, xenophobic and anti-Semitic views, Zsolt Németh, the Fidesz head of parliament's foreign affairs committee, said. The CDI's leadership passed the resolution at Fidesz's request, Németh told MTI. The document condemns Hungary's left-wing parties for their alliance with Jobbik, stressing that the CDI considers cooperation with "extremist, xenophobic, racist and anti-Semitic"

political forces unacceptable, he said, arguing that such cooperation hurt ethnic and religious minorities, including Europe's Jewish community. Németh said the CDI had also expressed concern over Jobbik's "anti-European prejudices", noting that the party had for a long time advocated Hungary's exit from the European Union, with many of its rallies at the time featuring EU flag-burning.

"In the present situation this anti-European sentiment is the last thing Europe needs," he said. The CDI has issued a clear zero-tolerance position on xenophobic, racist and anti-Semitic views, Németh said, adding that the organisation was calling on Hungary's left-wing parties to refrain from all forms of cooperation with political forces that express such views. In its resolution, the CDI raised concerns "about the fact that left and liberal parties in Hungary who in recent years distanced themselves from far-right Jobbik are now aiming to help the far-right come to power in a potential future governing coalition". The organisation, of which Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is a vice-president, "condemns any kind of cooperation between the European socialist and liberal parties and the xenophobic, anti-Semitic and anti-European extremist movements", it said. The CDI added that it specifically condemned Hungary's left wing "for including Jobbik, a party known for its anti-Semitic and racist ideology, in an electoral alliance". It also expressed

concern over cooperation between mainstream parties and “anti-Semitic politicians”, which it said “could seriously endanger the situation of the religious minorities, especially the flourishing Jewish community in Europe”.

HUNGARY RECORDS 110 CORONAVIRUS FATALITIES, 3,093 NEW INFECTIONS

Fully 110 Covid patients, generally elderly and suffering from an underlying illness, died over the past 24 hours, while 3,093 new infections were officially registered, bringing the total number of infected to 397,116, koronavirus.gov.hu said on Friday. The death toll has risen to 14,145, while 302,689 people have made a recovery. The number of active infections stands at 80,282, while there are 4,024 hospitalised Covid patients, 352 on a ventilator. Altogether 25,536 people are in official home quarantine, and the number of tests carried out has risen to 3,457,538. Fully 391,821 people have been vaccinated so far, with 152,432 having received the second jab. The government has extended coronavirus-related restrictions until March 1. Most infections have been registered in Budapest (73,853) and Pest County (49,760) so far, followed by the counties of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén (22,517), Hajdú-Bihar (22,306) and Győr-Moson-Sopron (22,116). The county least affected by the infection is Tolna (8,888).

CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER: CHINA JAB CONFORMS TO MANUFACTURER'S SPECIFICATIONS

An analysis by Hungary's public health authority has shown that China's Sinopharm coronavirus vaccine conforms to the manufacturer's specifications, the chief medical officer said, adding that the jab could be put to use once it is approved by the drug regulator.

Addressing an online press briefing of the operative board responsible for handling the epidemic, Cecília Müller noted that Hungary this week received 550,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine. The National Public Health Authority (NNK) has assessed the vaccine along with its documentation and submitted its findings to the National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition (OGYEI), she said.

Plans are to begin administering the vaccine to the public once it is granted authorisation by the OGYEI, Müller said, noting Hungary's shortage of other vaccines.

The vaccine is stored in single doses at 2-8 degrees Celsius, Müller said. It is approved to all demographics above the age of 18, except for expectant mothers, she added. Full inoculation sets in after two doses administered 21 days apart, she said. The

vaccine contains full, inactive coronaviruses, which is likely to elicit a stronger immune response, she said, adding that the virus is in use in 13 countries already.

So far, Hungary has received 1,474,715 doses of coronavirus vaccine from various manufacturers, enough to inoculate 737,267 people, she said.

KÁSLER MARKS NATIONAL DAY OF HEALTH-CARE PROFESSIONALS

Health-care workers provide “sacred service”, Human Resources Minister Miklós Kásler said, marking the national day of health-care professionals. Kásler said in a Facebook post that the government continued to raise wages in the sector, so that next year, the average wage of nurses would be two-and-a-half times higher than it was in 2016. The aim is to ensure a financial, spiritual and moral background for health-care workers and their families, so that they can work “to the best of their abilities and according to their faith, and with cutting-edge technology,” Kásler said. The national day of health-care workers is marked on the birthday of Zsuzsanna Kossuth, the head nurse of camp hospitals during Hungary's 1848-49 freedom fight against Habsburg rule, Kásler noted. “Our health-care professionals continue that committed, superhuman work,” he added.

FINANCE MINISTER INAUGURATES HQ OF INTERNATIONAL INVESTMENT BANK

The International Investment Bank's (IIB) decision to move its headquarters to Budapest is a boost to Hungary's financial position on international markets, Finance Minister Mihály Varga said at the inauguration of the IIB's new headquarters in Budapest.

The IIB has already supported Hungarian companies with more than 150 billion forints (EUR 418.0m), showing that Hungary was right to join the bank in 2015, Varga said. Hungary owns the second largest share of the IIB, 17%, Varga said. While Russia is the largest shareholder, the IIB is an international bank with the majority of its shares in the hands of several countries, he said. Hungary's esteem abroad is also boosted by the HQ's move from Moscow to Budapest, Varga said, noting that the IIB was the only one of five large investment banks in Europe that had their seat in central Europe.

The Hungarian finance ministry said in a statement that the move facilitated the IIB's seamless integration into the European financial environment. The bank is very successful with profits last year coming close to 7.3 million euros, the statement said.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: METRANS TO BUILD LOGISTICS BASE IN W HUNGARY

German logistics company Metrans is building a new logistics base and container terminal in Zalaegerszeg, western Hungary, Péter Szijjártó, the minister of foreign affairs and trade, said. The 15.7 billion forint (EUR 43.7m) investment will be supported by a 3.9 billion government grant, he said. The base will serve as a hub for trains en route between Adriatic ports in Koper, Rijeka and Trieste and Hungarian, Slovak, Czech and Polish destinations, Szijjártó said. The investment will create 120 jobs directly and 500 indirectly, he said.

Metrans is part of Hamburger Hafen und Logistik AG, the leading logistics and transport corporation in Europe, he said.

MAYOR OF TEKIRDAĞ RECEIVES HUNGARIAN ORDER OF MERIT OFFICER'S CROSS

Kadir Albayrak, the mayor of Tekirdağ, received the Hungarian Order of Merit Officer's Cross at the northwest Turkish town's Hungarian memorial site Rákóczi Museum. Hungarian President János Áder granted the Officer's Cross to Tekirdağ's mayor last March 15 but the awards ceremony was postponed as a result of the coronavirus epidemic. Albayrak received the award on Thursday, coinciding with his 72nd birthday, from Hungary's ambassador in Ankara, Viktor Mátis. It was granted in recognition of his efforts to strengthen Hungarian-Turkish relations, especially nurturing the historical memories of Ferenc II Rákóczi and the Hungarian colony that lived in Tekirdağ in the 18th century.