

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTV/Tamas Vasvari

Man receives Moderna coronavirus shot at a mobile vaccination facility

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

Orbán to meet Polish PM Mateusz Morawiecki and Matteo Salvini, head of Italy's Lega

Easter celebrations

TOP STORY

ORBÁN: VACCINATION ONLY WAY TO STOP VIRUS

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has said that vaccination was the only way to stop the coronavirus epidemic, adding that restrictions could only slow down the pandemic.

Orbán told public news channel M1 that the third wave was triggered by the British virus variant which is more aggressive than previous variants and is spreading faster. As long as infections were isolated cases, lockdown and staying at home helped but the current mass infection cannot be stopped, only slowed down with the help of the lockdown and restrictions. "There is only one cure and there is only one way to stop it instead of simply slowing it down. It is the vaccines that can stop and kill the virus," he said. It follows that all efforts should be focused on vaccination, he added.

Orbán said that as of Wednesday, Hungary had enough vaccines for 2,011,029 people. Vaccines for 2,356,000 will be available by April 4 and for 4,121,000 by early May, he added. These volumes include both eastern and western vaccines, he said. Orbán said he expected that enough vaccine will be available by late May or early June to inoculate 7 million people. He expressed hope that all registered persons will have received their first shots by late April or early May.

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ORBÁN: HUNGARY CAN START REOPENING 'SOMETIME AFTER EASTER'

Two and a half million people will have received their first Covid shot "sometime after Easter", which will open the door to a gradual reopening of the country, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in an interview with public news channel M1. Schools will be reopened in the first stage, to be followed by shops with a new type of security measure put in place, which will involve allowing one customer per 10 square metre. This can be followed by the third and fourth stages of reopening, Orbán said but declined to reveal details. He said the high number of daily infections and the number of available vaccines were "too much in contrast with each other for the time being". He said that once the number of available vaccines increases, the number of infections will change and "enable a rational and sensible discussion about further steps of reopening".

The prime minister promised to always inform the public one week ahead of introducing the next step and asked everyone to respect the rules. "There are not many rules and they are simple, clear and easy to understand," he added. Orbán called it highly important not to give room to anti-vaxxer sentiments. He said that generating anti-vaxxer sentiments and lobbying against vaccination was more than a mistake, it was a sin, because

people who listen to anti-vaxxers and then refuse to get vaccinated could easily die. Orbán said he could understand that there were some who refused to get vaccinated but asked them at least not to discourage others from getting the jabs.

ORBÁN PRAISES HEALTH- CARE SECTOR'S EFFORTS

Commenting on Hungary's hospital capacities, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, in an interview with public media, praised the work of doctors, GPs and nurses during the third wave of the pandemic. Orbán told news channel M1 that even if great efforts had to be made, there would be enough people and "our hospitals will work". Hungary's health-care system is in a much better shape, especially in terms of human resources, than many people had previously thought, he added. Around half of the beds reserved for coronavirus patients are still available and around twice as many ventilators can be put in service, together with beds, as the number currently in use, he said. He asked everyone to give as much support to nurses and doctors as possible and not to make their work more difficult "by spreading fake news". "This is not the right time to go into hospitals to make fake videos and fake news", he added. The prime minister said the health-care system was able to handle caring for coronavirus patients as well as for other serious patients.

Commenting on the vaccination of teachers, he said all teachers will get

their first shots "over one week ahead" of the reopening of schools which is sufficient for a start. He said he could understand if some still refused to go to class but they should at least not lobby against the reopening of schools because children's and parents' interests should be respected and education in schools should be restarted without delay.

SZIJJÁRTÓ WARNS AGAINST POLITICISING VACCINES

Because vaccines are the only alternative to the coronavirus pandemic, they must not be made into a political issue, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó told a press conference he held jointly with World Health Organisation Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in Geneva. The world is clearly seeing an exponential rise in Covid-19 cases and a regular emergence of new virus variants, Szijjártó said, underscoring the need to accelerate vaccinations. The minister praised the WHO for not having made the issue of vaccines an ideological one. He said those who had turned vaccinations into an "ideological issue" in Brussels had "practically caused people's deaths", insisting that they had slowed vaccination drives and undermined the willingness of the public to get inoculated. Szijjártó noted that Hungary would have its own production capacity for coronavirus vaccine by the end of 2022.

The two officials announced that the WHO's European leaders will visit Hungary at the end of the month for talks on linking the country's Covid vaccine production capacities to the global production chain. Szijjártó said Hungary would soon have administered the first dose of a Covid vaccine to 25% of its adult population. The WHO leader said his organisation would support Hungary in building its own vaccine production capacity, and encouraged the country to maintain the momentum of its vaccination drive.

HUNGARY RECORDS 258 COVID FATALITIES, 9,288 NEW INFECTIONS

Fully 258 patients, generally elderly with co-morbidities, died over the past 24 hours, while 9,288 new infections were registered, koronavirus.gov.hu said on Thursday. So far 2,065,948 people have received a first jab, while 787,207 have been fully vaccinated. The number of active infections has risen to 230,161, while hospitals are caring for 12,062 Covid patients, 1,512 of whom need respiratory assistance. There are 55,915 people in official quarantine, while 4,649,596 tests have been officially carried out. Since the first outbreak, 661,721 infections have been registered, while fatalities have risen to 20,995. Fully 410,565 people have made a recovery. So far, most infections have been registered in Budapest and Pest County, followed by the counties of Győr-Moson-Sopron, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén and Hajdú-Bihar.

HUNGARY PM CONGRATULATES NEW SLOVAK COUNTERPART

Prime Minister Viktor Orban congratulated Eduard Heger on his appointment as Slovakia's new prime minister, in a letter on Thursday. In his letter, Orbán said Slovakia was a key ally and a strategic partner, his press chief Bertalan Havasi said. The Hungarian prime minister welcomed that bilateral relations had developed in every field of cooperation over the past years, expressing hope that the two countries could further strengthen them. Orbán said he trusted that despite the extraordinary challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, "together we will be able to maintain the V4 group's role as Europe's engine of growth". He expressed hope to meet Heger in person soon to discuss political and economic affairs.

In another letter to outgoing Slovak PM Igor Matovič, Orbán thanked him for "the excellent cooperation" maintained "during this period burdened with unprecedented challenges". "I am sincerely grateful for your constructive attitude which helped us overcome the difficulties posed by the Covid-19 pandemic," he said. Orbán thanked Matovič for his "well-considered decisions" that he said allowed keeping the two countries' common borders open and their economies running. "I particularly appreciate the efforts you have made

to continuously strengthen the V4 cooperation," said Orbán.

GOVT SUBMITS AMENDMENT PROPOSAL TO PUBLIC EDUCATION LAW

The government has submitted to parliament an amendment proposal to the law on public education that would clarify rules on mandatory school and kindergarten enrolment, the human resources ministry said. A vote is expected during parliament's spring session. If passed, the amendment would make it possible for the child protection authority to initiate delaying a child's school enrolment if necessary, and if the parent has not yet initiated it. The bill would shorten procedural deadlines, allowing the Educational Authority to issue decisions sooner and for quicker appeals procedures. Also, in exceptional cases, a child's kindergarten enrolment could be delayed until Aug. 31 of the year of their 5th birthday.

Another important aspect of the amendment proposal, the ministry said, was that vocational school students would also be given the opportunity to take part in dual vocational training programmes that offer vocational training employment contracts. Under the amendment, the continued training of teachers would be coordinated by the teacher training centres of Hungary's higher education institutions. The amended

law would also regulate so-called hospital pedagogical activities aimed at supporting students requiring prolonged medical treatment.

GOVT SUBMITS BILLS PLACING ANOTHER TEN UNIS WITH FOUNDATIONS

The Innovation and Technology Ministry said it submitted bills to parliament that would transform another ten universities from state-run institutions into ones operated by foundations. The government has introduced the foundation model for universities with the aim of establishing a more flexible, more predictable operating environment, while boosting universities' competitiveness. The bills would add the Budapest Business School, the University of Debrecen, the University of Dunaújváros, the Hungarian Dance Academy, the University of Nyíregyháza, Óbuda University, the University of Pécs, Semmelweis University, the University of Szeged and University of Physical Education to the list of existing foundation universities from the autumn. The ministry noted that the transformations had been backed by the governing bodies of all of the universities.

The government will sign long-term strategic agreements with the universities' foundations for periods of 15-25 years, while signing financing agreements for periods of 3-5 years, the ministry said. It added

that a performance-based financing system for higher education would be introduced from September 1. If the legislation is passed, more than 180,000 students, almost 70% of university enrolment, will study at foundation universities from the autumn semester, the ministry said.

MAYOR APPROVES BUDAPEST CLIMATE STRATEGY AIMING TO CUT CO2 EMISSIONS BY 40% BY 2030

Gergely Karácsony, the mayor of Budapest, has approved the capital city's new climate strategy, and energy and climate action plan, which sets the goal to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by at least 40% by 2030 against 2015 levels. He also approved Budapest's green infrastructure development and sustainability action plan, according to a package of documents posted on the budapest.hu website. Budapest's overall energy consumption related to CO2 emission totalled 6,109,183 tonnes in 2015. The largest emissions originated from the energy consumption of public buildings, followed by transport, the documents show. The largest cut in CO2 emission can be achieved by improving the energy use of buildings and next by increasing the use of public transport and cycling, it said.

The document identifies among the actions the improvement of the energy efficiency of buildings, industrial production and service

facilities, as well as increasing the share of renewable energy sources. The actions further include improving the energy efficiency of the transport infrastructure, developing environment-friendly transport methods, increasing the size of green areas, preparations for tackling the effects of climate change during on human health during all seasons, as well as education and climate awareness. The large-scale programme would cost about 2,500 billion forints (EUR 6.8bn), part of which would be covered by the municipal council with the rest expected to be provided by using various forms of co-financing including planned contributions by the central government, banks, local districts and Budapest residents, according to the document.

The other comprehensive plan named after Dezső Radó, former director of the metropolitan park maintenance company between 1962 and 1984 and city protection expert, defines goals in developing and sustaining green infrastructure for the benefit of a healthy Budapest. Under the Radó plan, 53 green projects would be implemented with a total budget of 115 billion forints over the next seven years. The plan contains as a primary goal for the city to increase by 2030 the size of green areas per an inhabitant to 7sqm from 6sqm, which in would create a new public park area of 226 hectares. It further includes renewing the Népliget park, constructing a park around City Hall and refurbishing the Jókai Square area.

According to the documents, Karácsony also approved that Budapest public transport company BKV take out with the central government's preliminary approval a 30 billion forint loan for upgrading its bus fleet. The mayor further approved BKV's 2021 business plan which does not include any wage hikes. Karácsony also approved a strategic plan on quality developments in connection with Gellért Hill and a decree for naming the square next to Nyugati Railway Station after Béla Puczi, leader of a group of Roma protecting ethnic Hungarians during an anti-Hungarian pogrom in Târgu Mureş (Marosvásárhely) in 1990.

BUDGET DEFICIT 8.1% / GDP IN 2020

Hungary's budget ran a 3,870 billion forint (EUR 10.7bn) deficit last year, equivalent to 8.1% of GDP, data released by the Central Statistical Office (KSH) show. The deficit swelled because of the economic impact of

the pandemic as well as government stimulus and spending on Covid-19 defence. KSH noted that Hungary's public debt as a percentage of GDP reached 80.4% at the end of 2020, citing data compiled by the National Bank of Hungary (NBH). In absolute terms, public debt stood at 38,408 billion forints. Budget revenue rose by 0.2% to 20,775 billion forints for the year. Expenditures were up 13.4% at 24,644 billion. The budget deficit came to 2,276 billion forints in the fourth quarter, equivalent to 18.1% of GDP.

Commenting on the data, the finance ministry said Hungary's public debt was lower than the European Union average of over 90% of GDP. Meanwhile, the 8.1% budget deficit is expected to be around the EU average, the ministry said in a statement. Last year's budget provided ample resources for the government's pandemic response and economic protection measures, including the purchase of protective equipment and the financing of infrastructure developments, it added.

MOL, STATE TO ESTABLISH FOUNDATION

Hungarian oil and gas company MOL has said it will partner with the state of Hungary to establish a foundation, dubbed MOL New Europe Foundation, to fulfil its corporate responsibility objectives. The foundation is expected to be established as a "public interest trust foundation providing public tasks" in Q2 or Q3 2021 with equal capital contributions by the state and MOL, it said in a statement. MOL and its subsidiaries will transfer 42,977,996 shares – about 5.2% of share capital – to the foundation whose operation will be financed mainly from dividends on shares offered by the founders. The foundation will focus on the areas of sport, culture, health and environmental protection, and it will take over most of the corporate social responsibility activities carried out by MOL at present. MOL holds 7.37% of its shares in treasury. The state holds a 5.24% stake in MOL.