

East German

Hungary opens border to biggest legal exodus

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PI

Viets

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THOUSANDS of East Germans were crossing the Austro-Hungarian frontier early this morning after Hungary decided to waive border restrictions temporarily to facilitate what may be the largest legal exodus from Eastern Europe since 1945.

Hungary's Foreign Minister, Mr Gyula Horn, said that up to 60,000 East German tourists in the country would be allowed to leave for West Germany, via Austria.

"More and more are coming, and among them there is a growing number of those who do not want to return home but want to settle primarily in West Germany," Mr Horn said.

He said he could not say how long the border would remain open. "One thing is certain, it will be longer than 24 hours."

At exactly midnight local time last night, the frontier barrier at Nickelsdorf in Austria was thrown open and a fleet of tiny, battered East German cars drove west amid cheers. Within 15 minutes, 300 cars had crossed. Each driver was given 700 schillings (about £32) by the Red Cross for petrol to make the journey to West Germany.

The offer of an unimpeded exit to the West is certain to be taken up by all the registered 6,000 East Germans who have been waiting for several weeks in camps and is open to all East German passport holders in Hungary. Austria has agreed to waive visa requirements.

East Germany denounced the decision as an "organised trade in humans" and direct interference in its affairs. The official news agency said: "One sees with regret that representatives of the Hungarian People's Republic have let themselves be drawn against existing treaties and agreements into supporting this action prepared by West Germany."

But the West German Chancellor, Dr Helmut Kohl, said Bonn "shall never forget this testimony to humanity".

As news of the decision was broadcast on Hungarian state television, a crowd gathered around a set in Budapest's Szarvas Gabor camp and burst into applause. Many were near to tears. One young man said: "This is the best day of my life. There is a rainbow in the sky."

Some converted the "DDR" sign on their two-stroke Trabant cars, showing that they came from the German Democratic Republic, to a D, the sign for West Germany. Others painted red, black and gold insignia on the vehicles, but left off the hammer and dividers that distinguishes the East German flag from West Germany's.

It was not immediately clear how many would go across Austria and into West Germany in their own cars and how the rest would be transported.

In Vienna, a spokesman for the Red Cross said 60 buses would be sent to Budapest and Balaton early today to collect about 3,600 people and others would travel in their own cars. He said that at least 12,000 refugees were expected.

Austrian television said a Hungarian train carrying only East German refugees had left from a camp in south-western Hungary for the border and four more trains would follow.

Austrian railways had moved 50 railway cars, with room for 90 people each, to border points with Hungary. Another 40 West German wagons had been towed to Passau and Freilassing, near the Austrian border.

News of the Hungarian decision was given in a statement by the MTI news agency.

"Interior Minister Istvan Horvath instructed the police and border guards to let East

German citizens leave Hungary with their East German travel documents. The border guards are instructed to let them leave at any border point," it said.

The move came after an unsuccessful attempt to negotiate an amicable resolution with East Germany. East Berlin had insisted that the refugees return home and promised no punishment to those who did.

Hungary's decision amounts to a unilateral repudiation of a 1969 treaty, under which neither country would allow the other's nationals to go to a third country without permission.

Hungary said it had decided to suspend "the related paragraphs of the inter-governmental agreement" and make it possible for East Germans staying in Hungary to go to any country prepared to let them through or receive them.

In West Germany, Chancellor Kohl and the Foreign Minister, Mr Hans-Dietrich Genscher, expressed gratitude for Hungary's "humanitarian" decision.

Mr Genscher urged East Germany toward reform to avoid "total isolation". He said Budapest had given an example of the "new thinking" in East-West relations.

He said no negotiations had been held with West Germany and denied speculation that Bonn would offer Budapest financial aid in return.

Hungary can expect severe criticism from some of its erstwhile Eastern bloc neighbours to be added to that of East Germany over the next few days. Mr Horn acknowledged this when he said last night: "We live in a time when our reforms are irritating a lot of people... and our neighbours."

However he said that Hungary drew solace from President Gorbachev's commitment to political and economic liberalisation.

East Germany's leading Communist Party ideologue, Mr Hermann Axen, told a rally last night that Western reports that tens of thousands of East Germans wanted to leave were "a slander". East Germany had played a significant role in maintaining world peace and was anxious to keep open a dialogue with West Germany.

