

East German refugees begin to flood over border

Hungary opens for mass flight

Susan Veits in Budapest,
Ian Traynor in Vienna
and Anna Tomforde in Bonn

THOUSANDS of East Germans began to cross the Austro-Hungarian frontier early this morning after Hungary decided to waive border restrictions temporarily to facilitate what may be the largest legal mass exodus from eastern Europe since the end of the war.

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.

The offer is certain to be taken up by all the officially registered 6,000 East Germans who have been waiting for several weeks in refugee camps to hear if they could leave, but is open to all East German passport holders and any others who have acquired Western papers since arriving in Hungary. Austria has agreed to waive visa requirements.

East Germany swiftly denounced the decision as an "organised trade in humans" and a direct interference in its internal affairs.

As news of the decision was broadcast on Hungarian state television, a crowd gathered around a set in the grounds of Budapest's Szarvas Gabor camp and burst into applause. Many were near to tears. Children on the hillside waved flags and hugged one another. One young man said: "This is the

best day of my life. There is a rainbow in the sky."

Many rushed off after the announcement to pack their bags and tidy up cars which had been serving for weeks as family cabins.

Many converted the "DDR" sign on their two-stroke Trabant cars, showing that they had come from the German Democratic Republic, to a single D, the sign for West Germany.

Others painted red, black and gold insignia on the vehicles, but left off the hammer and sickle that distinguishes the East German flag from West Germany's national emblem.

News of the Hungarian Government's 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."

Hungary's decision comes after an unsuccessful attempt to negotiate an amicable resolution of the crisis with East Germany. It 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 refusing to return home to go to any country prepared to let them through or receive them.

In West Germany, Chancellor Helmut Kohl and the Foreign Minister, Mr Hans-Dietrich Genscher, expressed deep gratitude for what they termed Hungary's "humanitarian" decision. They insisted that it was taken unilaterally by Budapest.

"We shall never forget this testimony to humanity," Dr Kohl said. "It was a decision that reflected the spirit of European solidarity."

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

No negotiations had been held with the West German Government, but he expected that the leadership in East Berlin would be "informed" of the step by Hungary. Mr Genscher denied speculation that Bonn would offer Budapest financial aid in return.

In East Germany, which up to last night maintained a silence on the exodus, the Communist Party's leading ideologue, Mr Hermann Axen, told a rally that Western reports that tens of thousands of East Germans wanted to leave were "a slander".

He said East Germany had played a significant role in maintaining world peace and was anxious to keep open a dialogue with West Germany.

The Hungarian government made clear that the decision to throw open its border west had been taken under pressure of events. In Vienna last night, the Austrian Red Cross said it was expecting at least 12,000.



Road from Brighton pier ... Paddy Ashdown appear to patch up the old Alliance, at 10

Bush reacts

Mary Brasier in New York

THE United States is preparing to send troops into the main cocaine-producing countries of Latin America as part of its efforts to stop the flow of drugs across borders.

A secret clause of the Bush Administration's drug package calls for US troop activity in Colombia and Bolivia and in an



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