

Peace Corps gets to work in Hungary

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pg 6

Susan Viets in Budapest

THE first European Peace Corps volunteers arrived in Budapest yesterday following President Bush's pledge last summer to make Hungary and America partners.

The 61 English teachers were tucked neatly behind a screen separating them from an imposing bronze statue of Karl Marx at the Budapest University of Economics. In a welcoming speech the university rector, Csaba Csaki, said: "It is true we need the language which you have come to teach us but what we also need is to push aside prejudices."

The Culture Minister, Bertalan Andrasfalvi, greeted the group at the university.

Mr Andrasfalvi said the programme, the biggest undertaking by the Peace Corps in 20 years, would help build intensive links between Hungary and the US.

"It breaks down awful prejudices — because for decades one could hear that the US was imperialistic, not only in their policy but in their personality as well," he said.

Each volunteer will receive 12,000 forints (£120) a month towards living expenses — a paltry sum by American standards but one fifth more than the average Hungarian wage.

The teachers are here for two years and will be spread

across Hungary's 19 counties, 45 teaching in primary and secondary schools and the rest in universities. An additional 60 teachers will arrive annually for the next five years.

A US embassy official told the volunteers: "I'm sure if John F. Kennedy were alive today he would be very proud of what you're doing."

The peace corps was established by Kennedy in 1961 to improve America's image abroad. Its activities have traditionally focused on the Third World, but it now plans programmes throughout Eastern Europe.

Karen Fisher, an assistant professor at Kent State University, applied the day before the Hungary programme was announced. She had teaching experience to offer and said she knew very little about Hungary but "was attracted by the adventure and I expect it to open something new for my career". Many of the volunteers are of Hungarian origin.

The programme director, Vance Hyndman, said the volunteers "are in extremely high demand and there aren't enough to go around."

Those placed in universities will be helping to retrain now redundant Russian teachers.

The volunteers will live with Hungarian families and if President Bush's vision comes true, will spread the language of world business to Hungary.

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