

Europe worried about medicine stocks as coronavirus spreads

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European health ministers expressed concern about stocks of medicine and medical supplies Thursday and urged EU member states to work together against the new coronavirus outbreak.

There have so far been only around 35 detected cases of the COVID-19 strain in the EU, and no-one has died, but the scale of the outbreak in China has raised concerns in Europe.

Each of the 27 EU member states is responsible for its own decisions on imposing emergency measures like quarantine, tighter border controls or travel warnings.

But, meeting in Brussels, the ministers called for increased vigilance and cooperation to help track and halt the virus, and to organise the joint procurement of medical supplies.

A statement urged "enhanced coordination between Member States to ensure effectiveness of all measures, including, if necessary, measures regarding travel, while safeguarding free movement within the EU."

EU Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides stressed that member states had a "good level of preparedness" and refused to speculate about what might happen if the outbreak explodes to epidemic levels.

"The health systems as the situation stands now are able to cope and we are also looking at how we can further assist member states," she said.

"We are currently finalizing the assessments on stock levels, especially regarding personal protective equipment and today we informed the ministers that we are indeed ready to launch joint procurement with member states to procure more equipment."

"And so far, as you know, only a few cases have been reported and confirmed in the EU. But of course we all know viruses know no borders," she said.

Finland's health minister Krista Kiuru noted that the EU pharmaceutical

industry is dependent on active ingredients imported from China, where the virus outbreak began.

"We see two factors: firstly, a long epidemic could affect the transport of goods ... from China and above all the [pharmaceutical industry](#) in China would be faced with a shortage of manpower," she said.

"It is obvious that the management of shortages is fundamental for the maintenance of health care."

Travel rules

In addition to the medicines and [active ingredients](#) themselves, around 50 percent of the protective equipment used by medical professionals is imported from China.

"Member states have already, and we have, communicated with industry within the European Union to see how that they can follow up on on increased supplies," Kyriakides said, stressing that "so far" no shortages have been reported.

"So we are looking at this very closely monitoring it very closely, so that we're able to step in if this is needed."

According to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, Germany has seen 16 COVID-19 cases, France 11, Italy three, Spain two, and Belgium, Finland and Sweden one each.

Outside the European Union, Britain has detected eight cases and Russia two, as of February 12.

The situation is much more serious in China, where official figures indicate that 1,367 people have died and 60,000 been infected.

European governments are reviewing travel rules, but the ministers said there was no immediate need to ban all flights from China.

"We need to go further, to coordinate on barrier measures, arrival of travellers, epidemiological analysis of cases, protective stocks," France's Health Minister Agnes Buzyn said.

Buzyn warned that the crisis would develop over "several months".

Aside from the [health](#) dangers posed by COVID-19, Europe is also braced for economic fallout.

The European Commission said Thursday that it would maintain its eurozone growth forecast at 1.2 percent from 2020 and 2021 but warned that the new strain of coronavirus could hit trade with China.

And French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said he expected the outbreak to shave 0.1 percentage points off his country's growth.

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