

EU offers virus vaccine hope as leaders call for global access

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The European Union's medicines agency suggested Thursday that a vaccine for the coronavirus could be ready in a year, as world leaders urged universal access to a drug in the battle against pandemic that has killed almost 300,000 people.

The call came as the World Health Organization said the disease many never go away and the world would have to learn to live with it for good.

More than 4.2 million people have now been infected with the virus, which has forced swathes of humanity into some form of lockdown and pummelled economies, prompting fears of a global recession.

Countries in Europe and Asia are starting to ease out of punishing shut-in orders, allowing people to get back to work in a bid to revive stalled economies and restore some freedom of movement.

But in Latin America the virus continued its deadly march, prompting some governments to tighten restrictions to stave off more carnage.

Leaders around the world are faced with the seemingly impossible task of reopening economies while avoiding a dreaded second wave of the contagion.

With the race to find a [vaccine](#) gathering pace, the European Medicines Agency said one could possibly be ready in a year based on data from trials under way.

Announcing the forecast at a video news conference, Marco Cavaleri, the EMA's head of biological health threats and vaccines strategy, stressed that it was a "best-case scenario".

"We know also that there may be delays," he said, voicing scepticism over reports a vaccine could be ready as early as September.

Sanofi row

World leaders were among 140 signatories to a letter published Thursday saying any vaccine should not be patented and that the science should be shared among nations.

"Governments and international partners must unite around a global guarantee which ensures that, when a safe and effective vaccine is developed, it is produced rapidly at scale and made available for all people, in all countries, free of charge," it said.

But a row was brewing in France after drugmaker Sanofi said it would reserve first shipments of any vaccine it discovered to the United States.

The comments prompted a swift rebuke from the French government, and President Emmanuel Macron's office said any vaccine should be treated as "a global public good, which is not submitted to market forces".

Sanofi chief executive Paul Hudson said the US had a risk-sharing model that allowed for manufacturing to start before a vaccine had been finally approved—while Europe did not.

"The US government has the right to the largest pre-order because it's invested in taking the risk," Hudson told Bloomberg News on Wednesday.

Macron's top officials are scheduled to meet with Sanofi executives over the issue next week.

A vaccine could allow countries to fully reopen from the shutdowns that have thrown millions of people out of work.

But the WHO cautioned Wednesday that the virus may never be wiped out entirely.

"This virus may become just another endemic virus in our communities and this virus may never go away," said Michael Ryan, the global health body's emergencies director.

Trump snubs Xi

The prospect of the disease hanging around leaves governments facing a delicate balancing act between suppressing the pathogen and getting economies up and running.

With more gloomy forecasts emerging from the US, President Donald Trump has increasingly looked to pin the blame on China, where the virus first emerged in December.

He reignited his war of words with Beijing Thursday, saying he was in no mood to speak to Chinese President Xi Jinping, threatening to cut ties with the superpower over its handling of the virus he has dubbed "Plague from China".

"I have a very good relationship (with Xi), but I just—right now I don't want to speak to him," Trump told US media. "I'm very disappointed in China."

He said the US had "many" options in how it could retaliate, offering no

specifics but saying: "We could do things. We could cut off the whole relationship."

The snub comes after US security agencies accused Chinese hackers of attempting to steal intellectual property related to treatments.

Beijing reacted with fury to the "smearing" and claimed China was leading the world in COVID-19 vaccine research and treatment so had no need to conduct cyber espionage.

Meanwhile an ousted US health official told Congress on Thursday the US government had no strategy in place to find and distribute a vaccine to millions of Americans, warning of the "darkest winter" ahead.

"We don't have a single point of leadership right now for this response, and we don't have a master plan," said Rick Bright, who was removed last month as head of the US agency charged with developing a vaccine against the virus.

The United States is the country hardest-hit by COVID-19, logging a total of more than 84,000 deaths.

'Wave of bankruptcies'

The tensions between health and the economy were thrown into sharp relief Wednesday when Federal Reserve chief Jay Powell warned of a potential "wave of bankruptcies" that could cause lasting harm.

Further signs of the damage to businesses emerged Thursday when Lloyd's of London forecast the pandemic will cost the global insurance industry about \$203 billion.

But the reopening of economies continued in earnest across Europe,

where the EU has set out proposals for a phased restart of travel and the eventual lifting of border controls.

Children were back at school in Finland, while in France some beaches reopened—but only for fishing and swimming, and people in England were allowed to leave their homes more freely.

Elsewhere, Japan—the world's third largest economy—lifted a state of emergency across most of the country except for Tokyo and Osaka.

New Zealanders mingled with friends and hit the shopping malls for the first time in seven weeks as a national lockdown ended and businesses faced a "new normal" minimising the constant threat of coronavirus.

However, in Latin America the virus continued to surge, with a 60 percent leap in cases in the Chilean capital of Santiago, prompting authorities to impose a total lockdown on the city.

"It should have come a month before, about 20 days before, because there are many infected people," said Juana Vergara, a retiree.

In Argentina, officials were watching Buenos Aires warily after one of its poorest and most densely populated neighbourhoods showed a spike in infections.

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