

# Europe's vaccine row worsens as virus variant found in US

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A Moderna Covid vaccine is delivered in Germany, where authorities have declined to recommend the jab from AstraZeneca for older people

Europe's row with AstraZeneca worsened Thursday after Germany declined to recommend the firm's COVID vaccine for older people,

while the more contagious South African variant of the virus was detected for the first time in the already hard-hit United States.

With countries worldwide again tightening anti-virus restrictions after months of stop-and-start measures, the economic toll so far was coming into focus with the US seeing its sharpest contraction in growth since 1946.

UN data released Thursday also said the global tourism sector, battered by border closures and bans on mass gatherings, lost \$1.3 trillion in revenue in 2020.

Given the world's weariness over the pandemic that has now killed some 2.2 million people and infected more than 100 million, countries have been anxious to expedite vaccination campaigns.

The European Union's efforts were hit by an announcement from British-Swedish firm AstraZeneca that it could only supply a quarter of the doses it had promised for the first quarter of 2021.

The EU has demanded the drug maker meets its commitments by supplying doses from its UK factories, but Britain insists it must receive all of the vaccines it ordered—and there are simply not enough to go round.

Adding to the row on Thursday was an announcement from Germany's vaccine commission that it could not recommend AstraZeneca's vaccine for those over 65 since there was not enough data to assess its efficacy.



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson visits a Covid testing lab in Scotland

AstraZeneca and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson immediately defended the jabs, which have already been widely used in Britain on older people.

The controversy comes as the European Medicines Agency is expected on Friday to announce whether to recommend authorisation of AstraZeneca's jab, after the body has previously approved the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines.

## **Virus variant found in US**

The virus has killed more than 430,000 in America, by far the highest absolute toll, and more troubling news came Thursday when authorities announced they had found two people in South Carolina infected with a strain first detected in South Africa that health authorities suspect is more transmissible.

Scientists are worried about this mutation because it seems able to elude some of the effects of current vaccines and synthetic antibody treatments, though firms Moderna and Pfizer said their vaccines still work against the variant.

A more contagious form of the virus could nonetheless mean more people get sick, a portion of whom could end up hospitalized or in the most severe cases dead.

The economic pain over the last year in the US was clear in data out Thursday that showed the world's largest economy shrunk by 3.5 percent in 2020.



With herd immunity still a distant dream, the most powerful tools for policymakers remain social-distancing measures, enforced mask wearing, curfews, lockdowns and travel bans

The figures underscore the job awaiting President Joe Biden, who took office just over a week ago promising to get the country back on track with a \$1.9 trillion spending proposal.

At the same time, a long-delayed effort to probe the virus's origins creaked forward for a World Health Organization team of experts in Wuhan, China.

"So proud to graduate from our 14 days... no-one went stir crazy & we've been v productive," tweeted team member Peter Daszak after the

investigators left their quarantine hotel wearing masks, peering out of their bus window at the gathered media.

## **India's vaccine diplomacy**

China has sought to deflect blame by suggesting—without proof—that the virus emerged elsewhere.

"It's imperative that we get to the bottom of the early days of the pandemic in China, and we've been supportive of an international investigation that we feel should be robust and clear," White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said Wednesday.

Relatives of those who died in Wuhan have accused Chinese authorities of deleting their social media group and putting pressure on them to keep quiet.



Employees at lab in India that produces Covid vaccines

The virus has continued to hammer countries despite the onset of mass vaccination programmes that have seen more than 82 million doses injected, according to an AFP count compiled from national figures.

Pfizer, which developed its vaccine with German firm BioNTech, has also faced EU criticism for delays in deliveries but has now revised its production target for this year up from 1.3 billion doses to two billion.

In another boost to vaccine efforts, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said his country will supply more locally made inoculations to other countries.

India—home to the world's largest vaccine manufacturer, the Serum Institute—has embarked on a form of vaccine diplomacy, gifting millions of doses to its neighbours.

Concerns have been deepening over rich nations dominating vaccine supply, and the WHO said Thursday that Africa can expect to see at least 30 percent of its population immunised by the end of this year.

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