

France vows faster vaccine rollout after criticism

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France promised on Tuesday to speed up COVID vaccinations, but failed to silence harsh critics who said the government's rollout was scandalously slow and inept.

Health Minister Olivier Veran, under intense pressure for lagging behind

EU neighbours in dispensing vaccinations, said his government would soon catch up with the likes of Germany.

He said more than 2,000 people in total had been vaccinated by Monday—which compares to around 264,000 in Germany—and that the "cruising speed of vaccinations will catch up with our neighbours in the coming days".

The French government has been playing catch-up with its neighbours since the start of an EU-wide vaccination drive on December 27.

Opposition politicians have slammed the slow progress as a "scandal" and said France had become the laughing stock of the EU.

A satirical cartoon in the Le Monde daily on Tuesday showed a masked President Emmanuel Macron, sitting atop a snail and holding the reins.

The French leader met officials including Prime Minister Jean Castex on Monday to discuss the logjam.

"By Thursday we will increase numbers in a major way," Veran told RTL radio, saying that "we will be on an exponential curve".

France would now "amplify, accelerate and simplify" its vaccination strategy, he said.

Veran said vaccinations for people over 75 years of age who are not in care homes would be authorised by the end of January, covering five million people.

'Tell us the truth'

He said the campaign would also be widened to include firefighters and

home helpers over 50.

France was currently taking delivery of 500,000 doses of a vaccine developed by Pfizer per week, Veran said.

Once it is approved for the EU, 500,000 doses of a vaccine by Moderna would be added every month, he said.

But opposition politicians were far from satisfied, with Xavier Bertrand, president of the northern Hauts-de-France region, saying: "I want the government to tell us the truth: Exactly how many doses have been ordered by France?"

Bertrand, a former government health minister, said he had "the unpleasant impression that there is a lack of vaccines", while the Socialist deputy mayor of Paris, Emmanuel Gregoire, asked: "Where are the doses now?"

Manon Aubry, a European Parliament deputy for the left-wing France Unbowed, said: "2021 starts just like 2020 ended, with a lack of preparation, amateurism and, after the fiasco concerning masks and testing, we now have the fiasco of the vaccines."

Two lawmakers from the opposition LR party meanwhile called on the National Assembly to summon the health minister for an update.

'Sterile arguments'

Castex dismissed the criticism, saying "sterile arguments have never saved a single life", and promised more information at a news conference on Thursday.

Scepticism about vaccines is making the government's task harder.

Just 40 percent of French want to take the vaccine compared with 77 percent in Britain, according to an opinion poll last week by Ipsos Global Advisor in partnership with the World Economic Forum.

Veran also said France had detected "about 10 suspected or confirmed cases" of a new variant virus strain that emerged in England, adding that authorities were watching the highly-contagious mutant virus "like hawks".

French health authorities on Monday reported 4,022 new coronavirus cases confirmed in the previous 24 hours, taking the total to 2.66 million.

French deaths from COVID totalled 65,415, they said, after 380 new deaths were recorded.

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