

EU aims to boost vaccination rollout as variants spread

February 2 2021



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

The European Union put on a brave face Monday, defending its troubled vaccination programme and insisting that renewed pledges of vaccine deliveries would make up for a production shortfall.

Pharmaceutical giants have scrambled to ramp up production and deliveries as Chancellor Angela Merkel held talks in Berlin with German political leaders and vaccine makers, while anger grew over the EU's sluggish inoculation campaign.

The virus is known to have infected almost 103 million people so far—with more than 2.2 million deaths—and countries are desperate to move ahead with vaccinations and lift economy-crippling restrictions.

A new study showed that COVID-19 treatments and improved [hospital care](#) had reduced death rates in [intensive care](#) by more than a third, but warned that this progress might be stalling.

New, more contagious virus variants have also added pressure, with Lithuania on Monday becoming the latest country to detect a case of a strain that first emerged in Britain.

Britain, meanwhile, said it would increase testing for a variant first detected in South Africa after nearly a dozen cases were confirmed.

Delays have dogged both the procurement and rollout of vaccines in the EU, and Merkel has come under fire for allowing the European Commission take the lead in securing vaccines for the 27-nation bloc.

But Germany's BioNTech and its US partner Pfizer said Monday that improvements in their production capabilities would allow them to speed up supplies, pledging to send 75 million doses in the spring.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said Sunday that AstraZeneca will also boost shipments of its vaccine to the EU—although it would still ship less than foreseen in its initial agreement with Brussels.

The British-Swedish group had previously said it could deliver only a quarter of the doses originally promised to Brussels for the first quarter of the year, sparking outrage and accusations it was giving preferential treatment to Britain.

Chemicals giant Bayer, meanwhile, announced that from 2022 it would produce a coronavirus vaccine that fellow German pharmaceuticals company CureVac is developing.

The pledges came hours ahead of the talks in Berlin, where Merkel said there are "good reasons" the EU's rollout had got off to a slower start, such as avoiding rushed emergency approvals and lengthy negotiations with pharma companies.

Variants spread

In the United States, a group of Republican senators met with President Joe Biden to discuss an alternative to his \$1.9 trillion virus relief plan, arguing that a scaled-down approach could garner bipartisan support.

No agreement was reached, but Republican Senator Susan Collins described the meeting as "frank and very useful."

The moderate Republican from Maine is one of 10 senators pushing a \$600 billion package to help steer the world's worst-hit country out of historic health and economic crises.

Tight restrictions remain in place in a number of countries to curb the circulation of the coronavirus and its recent variants.

In France, border police turned away some passengers bound for non-EU destinations as new rules took effect banning flights to and from countries outside the bloc.

Only urgent reasons for travel are accepted, and border police require written proof of a negative test before allowing passengers to board, as Toure, a Malian national, found out when he tried to leave France for Bamako.

"I said that my mother, whom I hadn't seen in a while, was ill but they told me I needed proof," Toure, who withheld his last name, told AFP at a Paris airport.

French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire also warned restaurant owners that they risked losing COVID-19 financial aid if they open in defiance of the pandemic shutdown, following protests and reports that some eateries are secretly serving customers.

Italy on Monday relaxed coronavirus restrictions in most of its regions, with tourist landmarks such as the Colosseum reopening.

In Poland, museums, art galleries, libraries and shopping malls re-opened as the country eased some restrictions, though most schools remained shut along with bars, restaurants and hotels.

'Make a difference'

Britain's National Health Service said all elderly people living in English care homes who are eligible have now been offered their first injection.

After the government called for 30,000 individuals to help administer the Pfizer-BioNTech and AstraZeneca doses, volunteers lined up in a London skyscraper, waiting to be taught how to administer the vaccine.

"When I had the opportunity to do something that made a difference, I definitely wanted to jump at it," documentary director Mike Day told AFP at Canary Wharf in east London.

South Africa took delivery of its first shipment of coronavirus vaccines on Monday, paving the way to mass inoculation in the continent's worst-hit country, as President Cyril Ramaphosa said they had "passed the peak" of the second coronavirus wave.

Israel, meanwhile, extended its nationwide lockdown as the country presses ahead with an aggressive vaccination campaign.

In Dubai, bars and pubs were ordered to close for the month after COVID-19 cases spiked.

India unveiled a massive spending plan focused on health care and infrastructure, as the government sought to boost a [coronavirus](#)-ravaged economy on course for its biggest annual contraction on record.

© 2021 AFP

Citation: EU aims to boost vaccination rollout as variants spread (2021, February 2) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-02-eu-aims-boost-vaccination-rollout.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
