

EU hails deals to get more vaccine shots, tackle variants

February 17 2021, by Frank Jordans and Samuel Petrequin



Interior view of a new coronavirus, COVID-19, vaccination center at the 'Velodrom' (velodrome-stadium) in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021. (AP Photo/Michael Sohn, pool)

The European Union announced Wednesday that it has agreed to buy a further 300 million doses of Moderna's vaccine against COVID-19 and was injecting almost a quarter of a billion euros (almost \$300 million) into efforts to counter the threat of coronavirus variants that are

spreading on the continent.

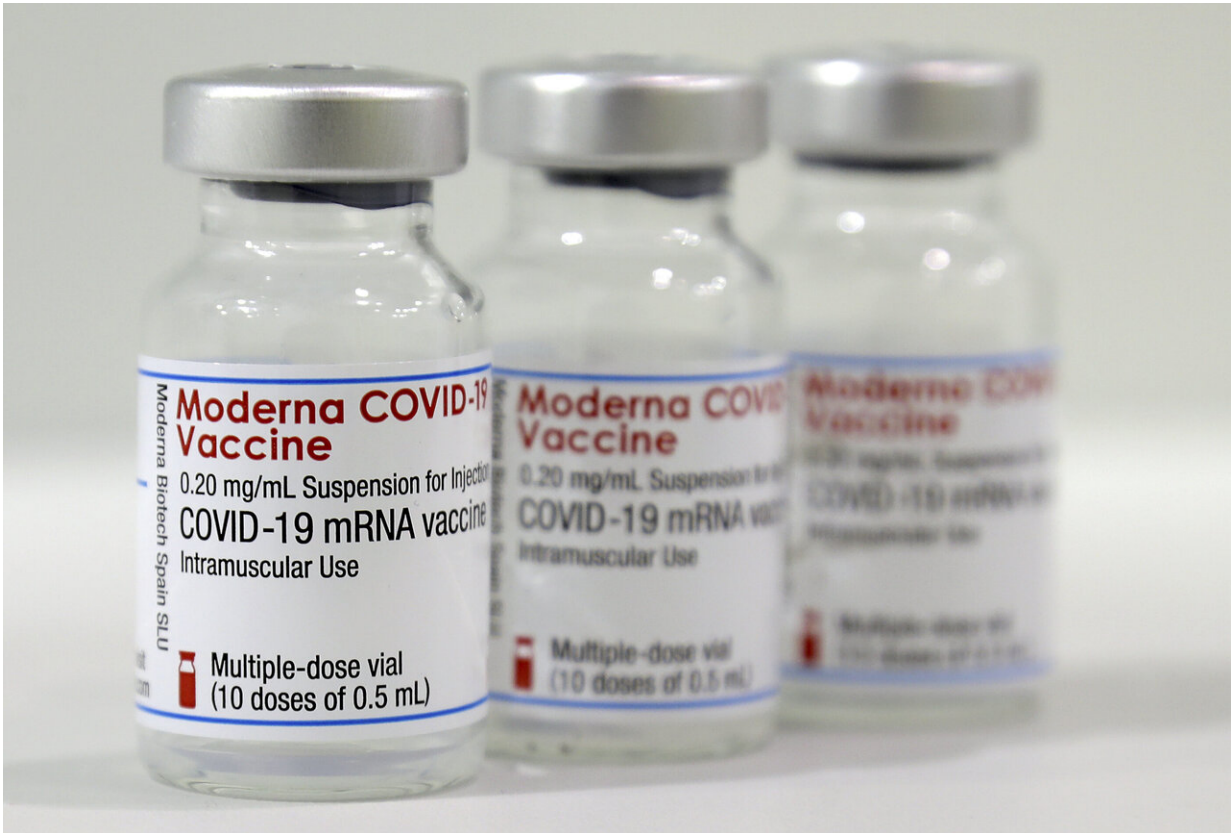
The news came hours after Pfizer and BioNTech said they had signed a deal to deliver an additional 200 million doses of their vaccine to the bloc.

The EU Commission said its second contract with Moderna provides for an additional purchase of 150 million doses in 2021 and an option to purchase an additional 150 million in 2022. Should the EU have enough supplies by then it will consider donating the vaccine shots to lower and middle-income countries.

"With a portfolio of up to 2.6 billion doses, we will be able to provide vaccines not just to our citizens, but to our neighbors and partners as well," EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said.

Von der Leyen and her team have come under intense criticism for their handling of the vaccine procurement process. While the 27-nation bloc began vaccinating its 450 million citizens almost two months ago, it still lags far behind Britain, the United States, and others in the share of population reached.

The Brussels-based executive also unveiled plans to better detect the virus variants and speed up the approval of adapted vaccines capable of countering them.



Three vials of the 'Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine' are pictured in a new coronavirus, COVID-19, vaccination center at the 'Velodrom' (velodrome-stadium) in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021. (AP Photo/Michael Sohn, pool)

As the British variant of the virus looks set to become dominant in the EU, the executive arm said it will spend at least 75 million euros to support genomic sequencing and develop specialized tests for new variants. Another 150 million euros will be allocated to research and data exchange.

"Our priority is to ensure that all Europeans have access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines as soon as possible," von der Leyen said. "At the same time, new variants of the virus are emerging fast and we

must adapt our response even faster."

Germany's health minister said the virus variant first detected in Britain last year now accounts for more than a fifth of all positive tests in his country. The variant has increased from 6% of the cases to more than 22% in just two weeks.

"The share of infections with this virus variant roughly doubles each week," Health Minister Jens Spahn said. "We have to assume that the variant could soon become the dominant one here too."



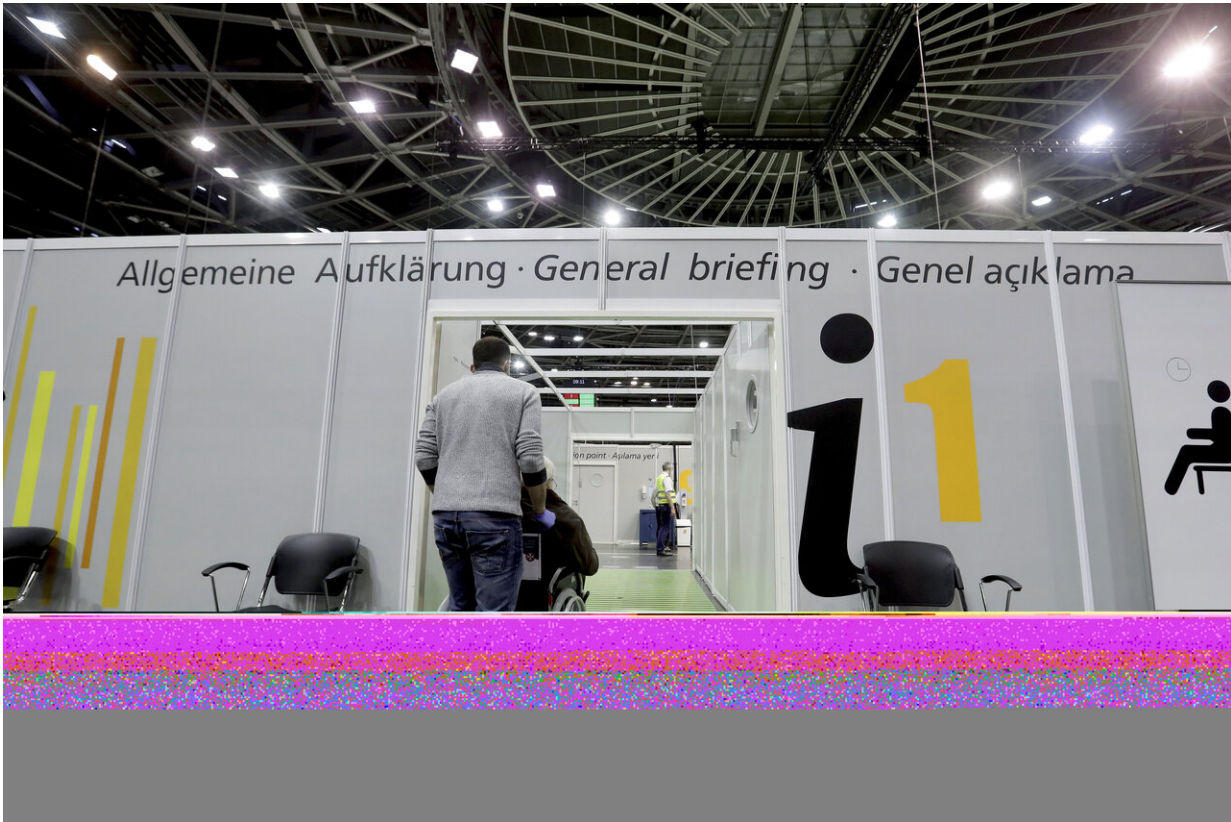
A person in a wheelchair is guided in a new coronavirus, COVID-19, vaccination center at the 'Velodrom' (velodrome-stadium) in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021. (AP Photo/Michael Sohn, pool)

In Slovakia, which now has the highest rate of virus deaths per population in the world, authorities said the variant first identified in Britain was found in 74% of its positive samples in a test.

Scientists say the U.K. variant appears to spread more easily and is likely more deadly, but so far the existing vaccines appear to be effective against it. Another variant first detected in South Africa, however, has shown signs of being able to evade the immune response generated by AstraZeneca vaccine.

Authorities in Germany's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia, expressed concern that some people appeared less willing to take the AstraZeneca vaccine than those made by Moderna or Pfizer.

"The authorized AstraZeneca vaccine isn't a second-class vaccine," the state's health ministry said. "The vaccine shows a good effectiveness and is well tolerated."



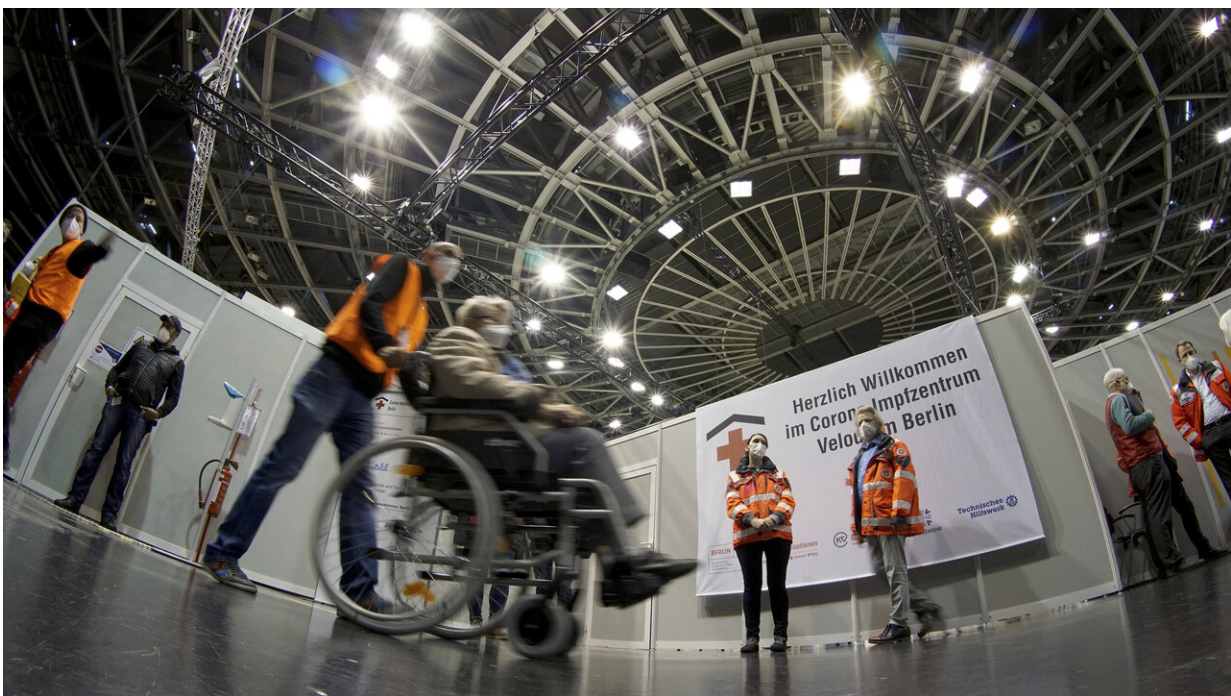
Renate Schulz, left, receives a 'Moderna COVID-19' vaccination by doctor Laura Tosberg, right, at a new coronavirus, COVID-19, vaccination center at the 'Velodrom' (velodrome-stadium) in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021. (AP Photo/Michael Sohn, pool)

Reluctance toward the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is only given to those under 65 in Germany, has been reinforced by reports that some people have had fevers and headaches after getting the shot. Officials say such reactions are normal after vaccinations, show that the body's immune system is responding and the symptoms should disappear after a day or two.

Spahn said if people didn't want to get the AstraZeneca shots, he and others would gladly take it.

"If people who are offered it don't take it, then we will offer it to the next person," he said. "We'll have 10 million doses of vaccine by the end of the week, for 80 million citizens. We're still in a period of shortage."

Pfizer and German partner BioNTech confirmed that they, too, have finalized an agreement to supply the EU with another 200 million vaccine doses.



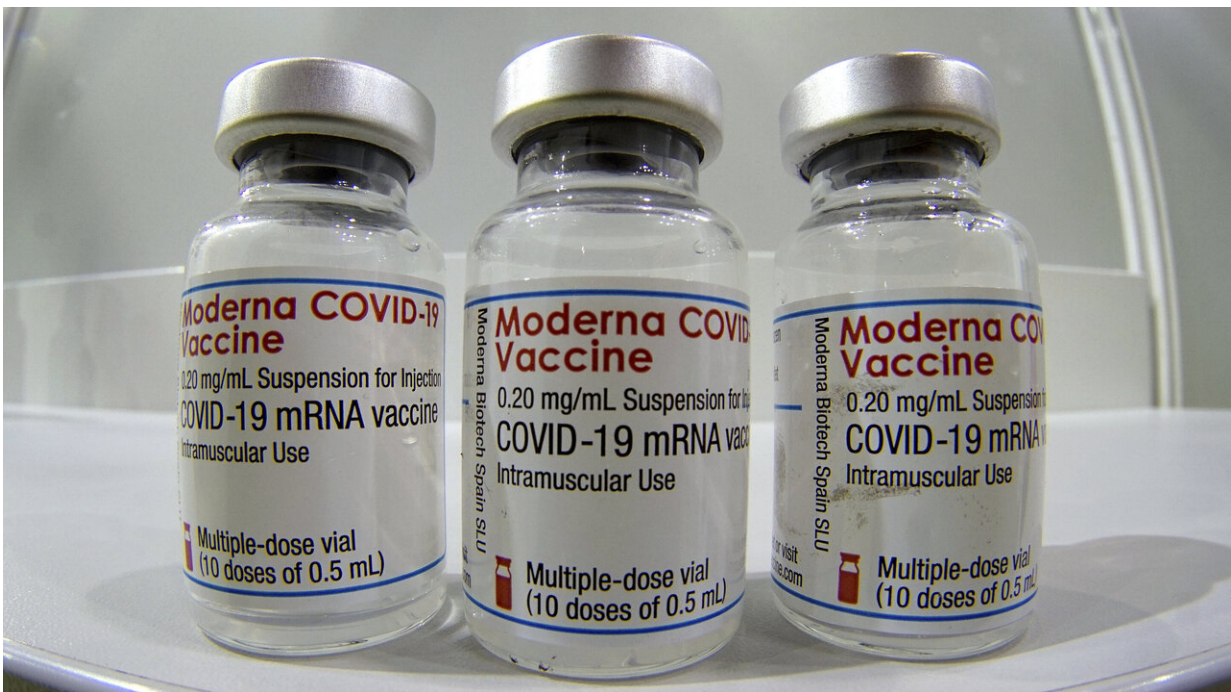
A person in a wheelchair is guided in a new coronavirus, COVID-19, vaccination center at the 'Velodrom' (velodrome-stadium) in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021. (AP Photo/Michael Sohn, pool)

The two companies said those doses—expected to be delivered this year, an estimated 75 million of them in the second quarter—come on top of the 300 million vaccine doses the bloc initially ordered. The EU's

executive Commission has an option to request a further 100 million doses.

Last month, Pfizer said it was temporarily reducing deliveries to Europe and Canada while it upgraded production capacity at its plant in Belgium. The EU also had a public spat with AstraZeneca over getting fewer of its vaccine shots than anticipated. AstraZeneca's chief blamed the lag on new factories needing to work out vaccine production issues.

The European Medicines Agency is reviewing a request from Johnson & Johnson to authorize its coronavirus vaccine and said it could issue an opinion by mid-March. The J&J vaccine is given in one shot, while the three other vaccines require two shots spaced weeks apart.



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Authorities in Berlin on Wednesday opened the capital's fifth coronavirus vaccination center, located inside an indoor cycling arena. The vast Velodrom, built as part of Berlin's failed bid for the 2000 Olympics, started with just 120 vaccinations but officials hope to increase that to 2,200 per day.

"We can't complain," said Dieter Krueger, who was waiting in its recovery room with Ilse, his wife of 60 years, after receiving a Moderna vaccine shot. "Things are looking up."

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