

# EU to 'take action' on AstraZeneca over vaccine supply

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Brussels said Tuesday it will toughen its checks on COVID-19 vaccine exports from the EU, as a top health official warned the bloc is "taking action" on AstraZeneca supplies.

The European Commission will on Wednesday adopt "a revision of the export transparency and authorisation mechanism," a spokesman told journalists.

The issue is also expected be discussed during a Thursday to Friday video summit of EU leaders.

Officials said the revision would not amount to a general export ban, but would support what EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen has dubbed the principle of "reciprocity".

But it will strengthen the commission's hand when it comes to preventing exports to countries which have a better vaccination record and which produce vaccines but do not export to the EU.

This implicitly targets Britain, which has moved more quickly than its neighbours to vaccinate its population, while importing millions of doses from plants based in the EU.

Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson expressed concern over the EU move, but also hope that a negotiated solution could be found.

"We in this country don't believe in blockades of any kind of vaccines or vaccine material," Johnson told a news conference.

"It's not something this country would dream of engaging in and I'm encouraged by some of the things I've heard in the continent in the same sense."

## **'Serious problem'**

The European Commission said last week it was ready to put stricter conditions on vaccine exports from Europe, in a step targeting UK-based

AstraZeneca.

Sandra Gallina, head of the commission's health directorate, told MEPs that the EU has "a serious problem" with AstraZeneca.

The Anglo-Swedish company delivered less than a quarter of the 100-million-plus doses it had pledged to supply in the first three months of this year, she said.

"On AstraZeneca, I would like to indicate that we are taking action," Gallina said, adding that the company had created a "bad reputation" for Europe by hobbling its early vaccination rollout.

Von der Leyen has threatened an export ban on AstraZeneca doses, fuelling a row between Brussels and London accompanied by mutual accusations of vaccine "nationalism".

The European Union is angry that AstraZeneca had, until this month, maintained smooth deliveries to the UK while severely undersupplying the bloc.

Britain is now facing its own AstraZeneca shortfall, with expected doses from a huge plant in India being delayed.

It wants to access AstraZeneca doses being made in the Netherlands in a factory expected shortly to be approved for operation.

## **EU countries split**

Under the EU's export-checking mechanism created at the end of January, a vaccine-maker needs to ask for authorisation to send doses out of the bloc.

So far, one shipment of AstraZeneca doses has been blocked, from Italy to Australia.

EU member states are split on whether to step up export bans.

Some see it as a way to prod pharmaceutical companies into honouring their European delivery schedules, noting in particular that the EU exported more than 10 million vaccine doses to Britain from early February to mid-March but received none at all from the UK.

Other countries fear it could trigger retaliation that would choke international vaccine supply chains, some of which furnish crucial ingredients.

The Netherlands is among the wary, with one of its officials saying an EU export ban would be a "lose-lose" scenario, but is willing to follow the commission in its decision.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Tuesday voiced her support for von der Leyen.

She said that Johnson was in "constant contact" with the commission on the issue, after having spoken in the past few days to her, French President Emmanuel Macron and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte.

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