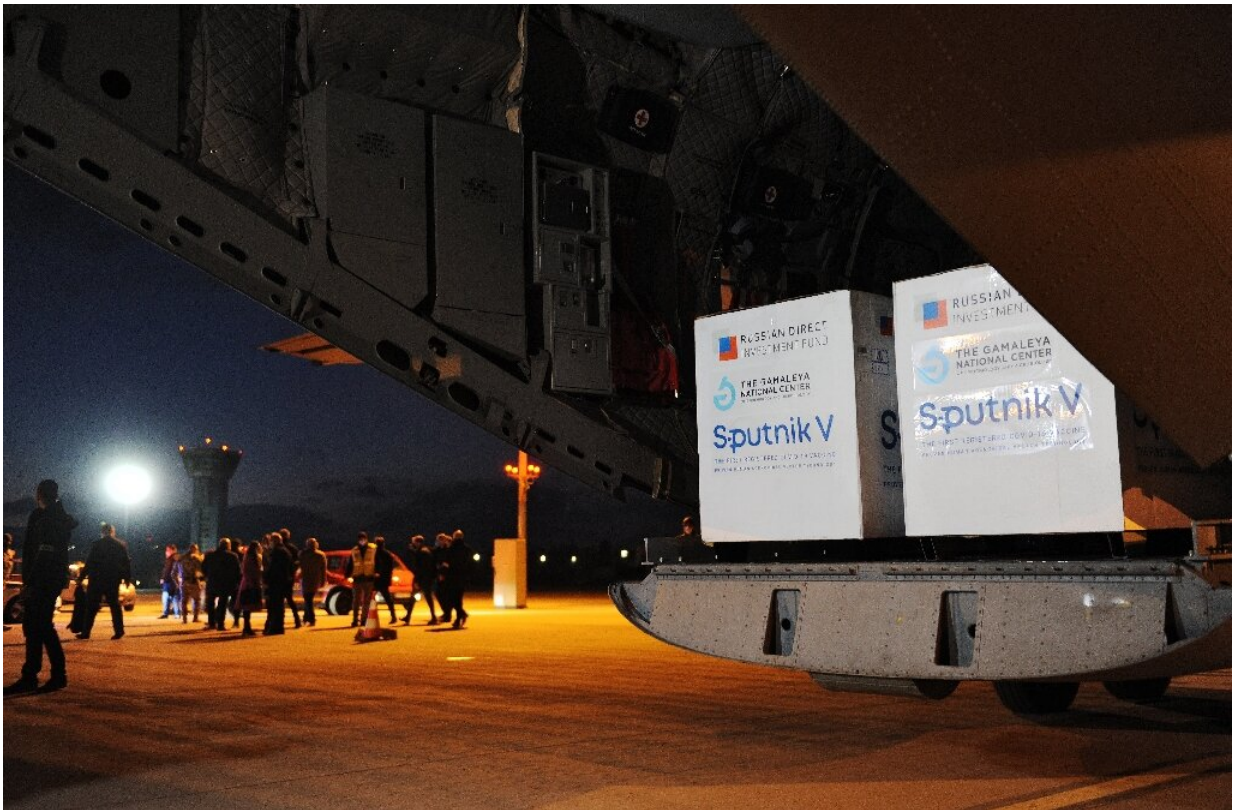


EU opens way for Russian jabs as nations try to hold off new surge

March 4 2021, by Danny Kemp With Afp Bureaus



Some EU members have gone it alone, approving jabs from Russia and China unilaterally

Russian coronavirus shots could soon be doled out across Europe after the EU said Thursday it was assessing the vaccine, while countries worldwide struggled to hold off another infection surge before

inoculations become widespread.

With frustration over restrictions having long weighed on populations across the globe, leaders were seeking to balance demands for easing rules while not unleashing another explosion in cases.

Vaccinations will be the ultimate way out, and with the European Union facing heavy criticism over delays in its campaign, its drug watchdog said it had started a "rolling review" of the Sputnik V shot.

Russia responded by saying it could supply doses for 50 million Europeans starting from June as the 27-nation bloc pledged to inoculate all those in need by the end of summer.

The EU has already approved three vaccines, but some members have gone it alone, approving jabs from Russia and China unilaterally after criticising delays.

In another sign of the pressure countries face, Italy blocked a shipment to Australia of AstraZeneca's vaccine, the first such export ban under an EU vaccine monitoring scheme.

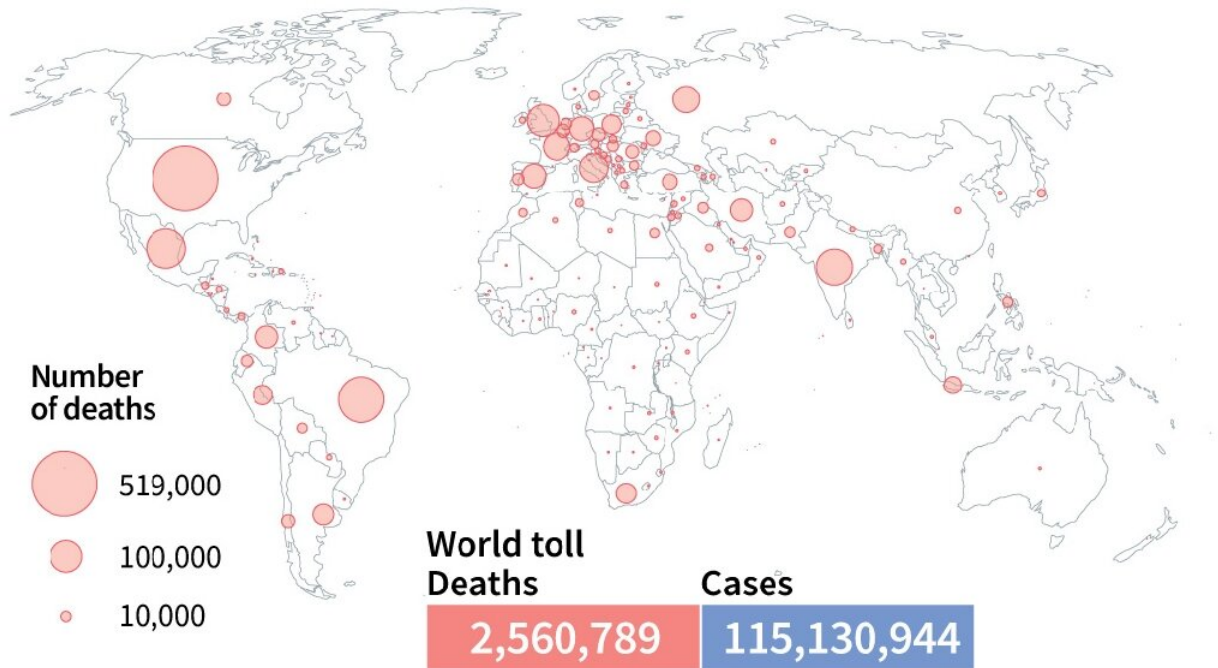
The EU has fiercely criticised the Anglo-Swedish company for supplying just a fraction of the doses it had promised to deliver to the bloc.

The need for a wide vaccine rollout was underscored on Thursday when the World Health Organization's European branch warned that infections had once again begun to rise in the region.

"This ends a promising six-week decline in new cases," said Hans Kluge.

Spread of the coronavirus

As of March 4, 1100 GMT



Source: AFP tallies based on official tolls



Global death toll and coronavirus cases as of March 4, based on AFP tallies

Hungary is among the European nations suffering a surge in infections and deaths, and the government said Thursday it will tighten its lockdown.

Ukraine also warned of a new national lockdown.

Rio de Janeiro meanwhile announced new restrictions on bars, restaurants and beaches, seeking to contain a surge pushing Brazil's hospitals to the breaking point.

'A cautious decision'

But leaders are coming under increasing pressure to end closures.

While Germany was among the nations promising an easing of restrictions, some US states have begun jettisoning mask-wearing rules—much to the chagrin of President Joe Biden, who called it "Neanderthal thinking".

The pandemic, which has killed more than 2.5 million since emerging in China in late 2019, has shredded the global travel industry.

German airline Lufthansa announced a record 6.7 billion euros (\$8.1 billion) loss for 2020 with chief executive Carsten Spohr calling the year the "most challenging in the history of our company".

The sporting calendar has also been ripped up by the virus.



Ghana is among a clutch of African countries to begin vaccinating in earnest this week

Japan is moving towards a ban on foreign fans at its summer Olympic Games, which has already been rescheduled from last year and faces questions over whether it will go ahead in any form.

Japan's Olympics Minister Tamayo Marukawa said "a cautious decision is necessary" regarding fans.

'Attempts at secession'

Europe's vaccine policy remains chaotic and rancorous, with new rows

brewing even as old ones are laid to rest.

Germany and Sweden on Thursday followed France's lead by reversing course and authorising the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine for over-65s.

Belgium is expected to follow suit, after a raft of studies showing the vaccine is effective for the elderly.

However France has waded into an argument with Austria and Denmark, who are bypassing the EU to broker a vaccine deal directly with Israel.

France's Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian acknowledged shortcomings in the EU's vaccination policies but criticised "attempts at secession" by some countries.

EU Industry Commissioner Thierry Breton said he was confident that "by the end of the summer, and I hope even sooner, all those who need to be vaccinated will have been".



More than 2.5 million have died from the virus and European countries like Portugal are among the hardest hit

The EU has been trailing Britain on vaccinations.

Britain was again at the forefront on Thursday, announcing a partnership with public health bodies in Australia, Canada, Singapore and Switzerland to ensure jabs modified to cope with new variants are fast-tracked.

Elsewhere in potential good news for future supplies, German group Curevac said it had signed a deal with Novartis for the Swiss pharmaceutical giant to help in its production of the vaccine it is developing.

As Europe remains mired in rows and faltering rollouts, several of the biggest African countries have only just begun their vaccination campaigns in earnest.

However, there was finally respite for some, with exhausted health workers in South Africa celebrating a drop in cases.

"One death is enough to traumatise nurses," Phuti Kobo, a ward manager at Thembisa Hospital near Johannesburg, told AFP.

"If you had more than five in a day, that was a real trauma, but we managed through it all. We will be much wiser when we approach the third wave."

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