

Germany scraps strict Easter shutdown as EU limits vaccine exports

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Germany on Wednesday backtracked on its plan to impose a strict Easter weekend shutdown after a public outcry, as the European Union said it would tighten vaccine export controls in a bid to ramp up its stuttering

inoculation campaign.

Vaccinations across the EU remain stubbornly behind those of hard-hit countries outside the bloc, with Brussels blaming production and supply problems for the slow rollout.

The melee over vaccines comes as several countries battle third waves of COVID-19, with some governments looking to impose new anti-virus measures despite widespread lockdown fatigue more than a year into the pandemic.

Germany is scrapping plans to close most of the country's shops over Easter (April 1 to 5) after stinging criticism of the plan.

The government instead asked people to stay home over the holiday and Chancellor Angela Merkel issued a mea culpa after reversing the measures.

"This mistake is mine alone," Merkel said. "The whole process has caused additional uncertainty, for which I ask all citizens to forgive me."

Germany is also weighing a temporary ban on certain trips abroad to help curb infections, a government spokeswoman said.

Tougher measures

Elsewhere on the continent, Belgium said it would bring in a new partial lockdown for four weeks, closing schools and limiting access to non-essential shops as it seeks to quell a third wave.

Poland meanwhile recorded its highest daily infections with nearly 30,000 new cases, while the Netherlands extended coronavirus restrictions until April 20 and France imposed new lockdown measures

in three regions.

Vaccines are seen as the way out of a pandemic that has now killed more than 2.7 million people around the world and plunged the global economy into a recession not seen in decades.

More than 479 million vaccine doses have now been administered globally, mainly in wealthier countries with Israel, the United States and Britain leading the pack.

But with demand far outstripping supply, countries are scrambling to secure much-needed doses of the handful of vaccines approved around the world.

The EU said its tougher export rules would prevent what it sees as an unfair one-way flow of vaccines out of the bloc.

"Open roads should run in both directions," European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said.

Brussels insisted the measure was not an "export ban", but it could limit vaccine exports to countries like Britain which produce some of their own vaccines but do not in turn send doses to the EU.

AstraZeneca woes

Brussels accuses the former EU member of laying claim to AstraZeneca vaccines produced at a plant in the Netherlands, and says the UK-based company has fallen short on deliveries promised to the EU.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson hit back Wednesday, issuing a warning over so-called blockades.

"I would just gently point out to anybody considering a blockade, or interruption of supply chains, that companies may look at such actions and draw conclusions about whether or not it is sensible to make future investments in countries where arbitrary blockades are imposed," he said.

The tussle has added to AstraZeneca's woes after several countries suspended its vaccine over blood clot fears.

The World Health Organization and the European Medicines Agency have both said the jab is safe and effective, dismissing feared links with clots.

Finland on Wednesday said it would resume the shot for over 65s, while Iceland would do the same for people over 70, joining several countries that have started using the vaccine again.

In a fresh controversy, the British-Swedish firm this week published promising results from its US trials, but a day later the US National Institute for Allergies and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) raised concerns the results were outdated.

The head of the agency, Anthony Fauci, said the data discrepancy was a "bump in the road" and hoped it would not puncture confidence in vaccines.

"When you look at the data, this is going to turn out to be a good vaccine," said Fauci, the White House's top pandemic adviser.

AstraZeneca has backed its shot, saying Tuesday that a review found the interim results it had announced were "consistent", and that it would release new analysis and data "within 48 hours".

'Like a war'

The pandemic has taken a turn for the worse in many nations, with known infections worldwide approaching 124 million.

Hard-hit Brazil's daily death toll crossed 3,000 for the first time, as the South American nation's healthcare infrastructure was pushed to the brink by an explosion of cases.

Supplies of medical oxygen for COVID-19 patients have fallen to "worrying" levels in six of Brazil's 27 states, officials said Tuesday.

The warning raised fears of a repeat of horrific scenes in the northern city of Manaus in January, when oxygen shortages left dozens of COVID-19 patients to suffocate to death.

"You have no idea what it is to see families running around to find oxygen canisters," Manaus-based doctor Adele Benzaken told AFP.

"It was like a war—the chaos of a bombing, when people are running around desperately without knowing what to do."

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