

Stade de France turned into giant 'vaccinodrome' for Covid jabs

April 6 2021

France on Tuesday converted its biggest stadium, the Stade de France, into a giant vaccination centre as the government scrambles to keep its promise of a giant leap forward in administering COVID-19 jabs.

Built for the 1998 football World Cup, the stadium on the northern outskirts of Paris has a seating capacity of over 80,000 and is usually reserved for topline sports events such as international football and rugby matches or major pop concerts.

But from early Tuesday people were queueing to get an injection in the latest, and biggest, of France's stadiums to be converted for coronavirus inoculations, which have been dubbed "vaccinodromes".

In March, the southern city of Marseille opened its velodrome for vaccinations. Lyon followed suit last week, making available its Groupama Stadium, which reported 10,000 vaccinations over the Easter weekend alone.

The Stade de France, in stark contrast to the showy events that usually take place there, is located in mainland France's poorest area.

The department of Seine-Saint-Denis has been exceptionally hard hit by COVID, recording 800 cases for every 100,000 inhabitants—more than three times the emergency threshold.

'It's strange'

In the short term, health authorities are aiming for 10,000 jabs per week in the stadium, half of which will be earmarked for the 1.6 million residents of the Seine-Saint-Denis department.

"It's strange to have to come to the Stade de France," said Cherkaoui Maati, one of first to receive a jab here.

"It would have been simpler to give the doses to doctors and I could have been vaccinated a long time ago," the 74-year-old diabetic, who said he had been waiting for his jab for months, told AFP.

Isabelle Duval, a 57-year old secretary, said she was "relieved" to have clinched an appointment.

"Everybody needs to get vaccinated, young people too, but you get the impression it's not moving forward," she said.

France is experiencing a third wave of the coronavirus pandemic, with intensive care admissions rising past the worst levels seen in the second wave in November 2020.

In response, the government has extended regional measures, including a nightly curfew and travel restrictions, to the entire country, and shut schools.

President Emmanuel Macron has promised a sharp acceleration of the vaccination drive, aiming for a total of 20 million inoculations by mid-May for the nation of 67 million, and 30 million by mid-June.

After much criticism for France's slow vaccine rollout, there were signs over the three-day Easter weekend that things were picking up.

'We're getting closer'

More than a million new vaccinations were reported over the weekend, taking the total to have received at least one dose of the two-course treatment to 9.3 million.

The government hopes to take delivery of 12 million new vaccine doses in April.

The over 5,400 COVID patients in intensive care is still well short of the 7,000 recorded in April 2020 just after the start of the pandemic, but Health Minister Olivier Veran said Monday that "it's possible that we're getting closer" to the first-wave peak.

After cancelling or delaying non-COVID surgery appointments, France now has a total capacity of 8,000 intensive care beds available for coronavirus cases, he said.

The health ministry said it expected infection numbers to peak over the coming week, but that another increase was likely when primary school pupils returned after a spring break at the end of the month.

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