

US-Germany rift could scupper vaccine patent waiver

May 7 2021, by Issam Ahmed With Afp Bureaus



India's cremation sites have been overwhelmed by the surge in coronavirus deaths

A bold US bid to waive patents on much-needed coronavirus vaccines was strongly opposed by Germany on Thursday, threatening to derail the

proposal that requires the consensus of World Trade Organization members to pass.

Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla meanwhile told AFP his company was "not at all" in favor of the measure, insisting [intellectual property](#) is not the main roadblock to more production and that building new plants would be counterproductive.

Rich nations have faced accusations of hoarding shots while [poor countries](#) struggle to get inoculation programs off the ground, with the virus surging across the developing world in contrast to the easing of restrictions in Europe and the United States.

The problem was highlighted as India, one of the worst-hit countries, registered record COVID-19 cases and deaths on Thursday.

Under intense pressure to ease protections for [vaccine manufacturers](#), Washington's Trade Representative Katherine Tai said Wednesday that the US "supports the waiver of those protections for COVID-19 vaccines."

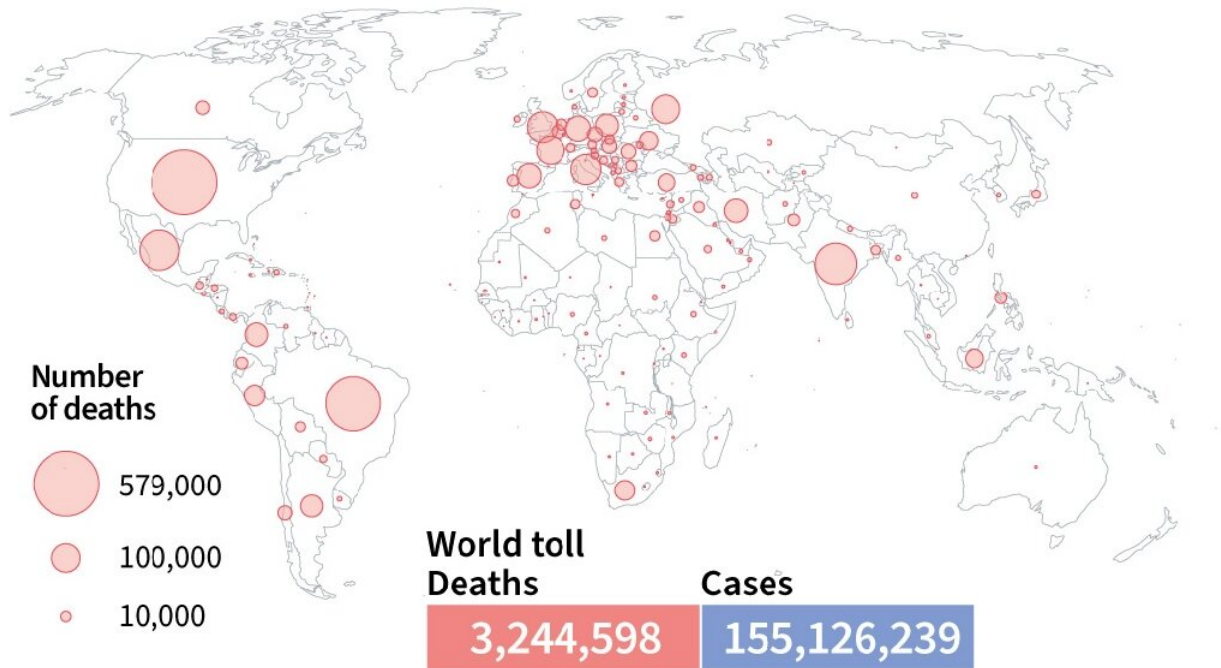
WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus hailed the announcement as "a monumental moment in the fight against COVID-19."

The move was also praised by the African Union, Paris, Rome and Vienna as well as World Trade Organization chief Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who previously voiced reluctance on the issue, said Brussels was ready to discuss the proposal.

Spread of the coronavirus

As of May 6, 1000 GMT



Source: AFP tallies based on official tolls



Global death toll and coronavirus cases as of May 6 at 1000 GMT, based on AFP tallies

Momentum built as Russian President Vladimir Putin said he too supported the idea of a patent waiver, as Russia registered a single-dose virus shot called Sputnik Light.

But Berlin's decision to come out strongly against the proposal has now left its fate unclear.

"The protection of intellectual property is a source of innovation and must remain so in the future," a spokeswoman for Angela Merkel's

government said.

Bourla, whose company developed the first vaccine authorized in the West with Germany's BioNTech, told AFP that it wasn't possible for other facilities to develop vaccines based on mRNA technology.

He cautioned firmly against disrupting current operations "with politically motivated announcements."

The US-Germany rift, a boon to big pharmaceutical companies, comes as more than 3.2 million people have died from the virus worldwide since the crisis began in late 2019.

Pharma stocks hit

Shares in vaccine manufacturers dropped after the EU and Russia followed the United States in signaling they are open to the idea of patent waivers for [coronavirus](#) vaccines.



A health worker collects a swab sample from a resident in Colombo, Sri Lanka

But the sell-off was less severe than the day before, which Gregori Volokhine of Meeschaert Financial Services credited to traders realizing the complexity of reaching an agreement at the WTO and German intransigence.

Supporters of the waiver say that easing patent restrictions will spur production of low-cost generic vaccines, helping poor countries that are struggling to immunize their populations.

Opponents argue it could erode pharmaceutical companies' profit incentive to develop new treatments.

India has been leading the fight to allow more drugmakers to manufacture the vaccines, as it faces a surge that has seen patients die in streets outside hospitals due to bed and medical oxygen shortages.

The country on Thursday reported almost 4,000 COVID-19 deaths and more than 412,000 infections—both new records.

Eid celebrations hit

The crisis in India has sparked a chain reaction, with the WHO warning Thursday of a new wave of COVID-19 infections in Africa due to delayed vaccine supplies from the South Asian giant.

"The delay in the delivery of vaccine doses from the Serum Institute of India earmarked for Africa, the delay in the deployment of vaccines and

the emergence of new variants means that the risk of a new wave of infections remains very high in Africa," it said in a statement.



A Covid patient in the ICU in a hospital outside Paris, France

The pandemic was also roiling Eid al-Fitr celebrations across Muslim-majority nations.

Egypt, which announced a partial shutdown of malls and restaurants, called off festivities for the holiday to curb the spread.

The country has now recorded more than 13,000 deaths, with Prime

Minister Mostafa Madbouli saying it was suffering a "third wave."

Eid celebrations are also facing disruption in Malaysia, where new rules in the capital Kuala Lumpur will see only essential businesses allowed to operate and restaurant dining-in banned after daily cases topped 3,000 recently.

As Europe gears up for the summer holiday season, Israel was added to an EU safe list for countries whose nationals can freely travel to the continent.

The [vaccine](#) rollout is speeding up in Europe, with Germany aiming to offer vaccines to all children aged 12 and over by the end of August once a jab is approved for younger people by the European regulator, Health Minister Jens Spahn said.

And gyms, theatres and cinemas on Thursday welcomed Danes back thanks to a new round of COVID-19 restriction easing and a reliance on a "corona pass" indicating vaccination, past infection or a recent negative test.

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Citation: US-Germany rift could scupper vaccine patent waiver (2021, May 7) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-05-us-germany-rift-scupper-vaccine-patent.html>

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