

Europe vaccine rollout shifts up a gear as supply worries linger

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France and Russia prepared to beef up their coronavirus inoculation programmes from next week, even as authorities on Sunday sought to allay concerns about supplies of the vaccines while the global pandemic shows no sign of being brought under control.

With infections surging past 94 million and more than two million

deaths—and Europe among the hardest-hit regions—France and Russia were hoping to shift their vaccination programmes into a higher gear from Monday.

That is when France, which saw its death toll rise past 70,000 at the weekend, is set to begin inoculating people over 75 and Russia will begin mass vaccinations.

The vaccination campaigns come amid concerns that delays in the delivery of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine could hamper the rollout in Europe, which critics have already condemned as too slow.

US drugmaker Pfizer, which developed the jab in collaboration with Germany's BioNTech, said it was working to "significantly" scale up production at its plant in Belgium in the second quarter.

After a short delay, deliveries should be back to the original schedule to the EU from January 25.

"There's a dip," France's Europe minister Clement Beaune told Franceinfo radio.

"But it's better that it happens now when we have stockpiles than when the wider vaccination campaign starts."

Tighter curbs

Until vaccination is widespread, countries across the globe are still having to rely on lockdowns, curfews and social distancing to control the spread of the virus.

Switzerland and Italy are tightening their restrictions from Monday and Britain will require all arrivals to quarantine and show negative tests.

Newspaper reports suggested the UK could try to emulate countries such as Australia and New Zealand in requiring travellers to self-isolate in hotels at their own expense.

Foreign minister Dominic Raab said such a system could be difficult to manage but "we need to look at that very carefully based on the experience of other countries".

Austria, currently in its third national lockdown, said that the current curbs will be extended by another two weeks until February 8.

Oman said it will close its land borders for one week, possibly two, starting Monday over concerns about new variants of [coronavirus](#), according to the official Oman News Agency. Air travel remains open.

Good start in India

India's vaccination drive got off to a successful start with more than 224,000 people receiving their first jabs and just three people hospitalised after side effects, the health ministry said Sunday, as reports emerged about concerns over a homegrown vaccine.

Authorities have given emergency-use approval for two jabs—"Covishield", a version of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, and the Indian-made "Covaxin", which has yet to complete its Phase 3 trials.

The government plans to immunise some 300 million people out of its population of 1.3 billion by July.

In Israel, the prison service said it would begin vaccinating all prison inmates, including Palestinians, following calls from right groups, Palestinian officials and Israel's attorney general.

Israel has given at least one vaccine dose to more than two million of its citizens, a pace widely described as the world's fastest per capita.

But the Jewish state faced harsh criticism when Public Security Minister Amir Ohana said Palestinian prisoners would be the last to get inoculated.

Spain on Sunday began administering second vaccine doses to people who had already received the first at the end of December, mostly nursing home residents and care staff.

In Norway, where 13 frail elderly people died after a first vaccine injection, the Medical Medicines Agency, after assessing the cases, suggested last week that the deaths could be linked to side effects of the jab.

But agency official Steinar Madsen told public broadcaster NRK that there was no cause for alarm.

"It is quite clear that these vaccines present very little risk, with the minimal exception of the most fragile patients," he said.

Belgian cluster

In Belgium, 111 people in an elderly care home—or two-thirds of all residents and staff—tested positive for the British variant of the novel coronavirus, which is feared to be more contagious. Three of them have died.

Belgium has registered 20,396 COVID-19 deaths since the start of the pandemic.

In the world of sports, Australian Open chief Craig Tiley said the Grand

Slam tournament will still begin next month, even as problems mounted for organisers as another 25 players were quarantined for two weeks.

A total of 72 players are now confined to their hotel rooms in Melbourne for 14 days, and barred from practising, after coming into contact with COVID-19 cases on flights to Australia.

The tournament was thrown into disarray on Saturday when three people tested positive for COVID-19 on two of the 17 [charter flights](#) bringing players and their entourages to Melbourne and Adelaide.

A fourth person, a member of a broadcast team on one of the same flights tested positive on Sunday.

Quarantine rules mean 47 players will not be allowed out to train but organisers said the tournament was still set to begin on February 8.

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