

WHO Europe: Vaccine production delays are a real issue

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A nurse administers the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine to a resident at DomusVi nursing home in Alcala Henares, Spain, Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021. Health authorities in Spain are complaining that they are running short of COVID-19 vaccines due to delays in deliveries by pharmaceutical companies. Spain along with the rest of the European Union has suffered delays since Pfizer announced two weeks ago that it would reduce deliveries temporarily during a plant upgrade. (AP Photo/Manu Fernandez)

National tensions are erupting over slow coronavirus vaccine rollouts and production delay issues are real, but "no one is safe until everyone is safe," the European chief for the World Health Organization said Thursday.

Dr. Hans Kluge said international solidarity in the fight against the virus that has already killed 2.1 million people was "key," while noting tensions between that wider goal and the responsibility each leader felt to protect their own people.

He said "the telephone line is very hot" in conversations with European Union officials and others clamoring for more vaccines, fearing new, more contagious virus variants that have already swept through Britain and are gaining elsewhere.

The cautionary note comes as the EU has accused pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca of failing to deliver the coronavirus vaccine doses that it promised to the 27-nation bloc despite getting EU funding to ramp up vaccine production. The company says the production issues at EU plants are slowing the amount of vaccines available, and it can't give what it does not have. Fellow vaccine maker Pfizer has had supply issues too, due to a production upgrade at a plant in Belgium.

Kluge said he had spoken with EU President Charles Michel and EU Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides, citing a "general goodwill" and an "understanding that no one is safe until everyone is safe. But the reality is that for the time being, there is realistically a shortfall of vaccines."

"The telephone line is very hot as you can imagine," Kluge told reporters at a video news conference from WHO Europe headquarters in Copenhagen, alluding to the European leaders. "We stand by them and we do understand the situation."

Dr. Siddhartha Datta, WHO Europe's program manager for vaccine-preventable disease and immunization, noted "production hindrances" and supply issues at both AstraZeneca and Pfizer. He noted there is always an "initial teething time of vaccine rollout and production." The EU alone has 450 million residents, while Britain has 67 million, Russia and the former Soviet nations have over 290 million.

"Nobody can deliver this entire scale of a vaccination alone," he said.

Kluge said 35 of the 53 countries in WHO Europe's region have begun vaccinations, administering 25 million doses. He said widespread lockdowns had helped limit the spread of the coronavirus and led to a "significant decrease in 14-day cumulative incidence" in 30 of those countries—seven nations more than two weeks ago.

"Yet, transmission rates across Europe are still very high, impacting health systems and straining services, making it too early to ease-up," he said.

Dr. Catherine Smallwood, the agency's senior emergency officer, said efforts to lower virus transmission rates were "a little bit like stopping a fast-moving train" and said sweeping restrictive measures like school closings could be necessary. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced on Wednesday that schools in England would remain closed until at least March 8.

"As that train—the transmission—starts to slow and slow and slow, that's when we can start to be more specific, start to be more efficient in the way we control the spread of the disease," Smallwood said.

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