Germany seeking EU COVID vaccine approval 'before Christmas'

15 December 2020

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Germany said Tuesday it wanted the European Union to approve the BioNTech/Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine "before Christmas", as calls grow for the EU health regulator to speed up its decision process.

"The goal is to get approval before Christmas," German Health Minister Jens Spahn told a press conference in Berlin. "We want to start vaccinating in Germany before the end of the year."

The Amsterdam-based European Medicines Agency (EMA) had previously said it planned to hold a special meeting by December 29 at the latest to discuss granting conditional approval for the jab.

That puts the EU behind a growing number of nations that have already granted emergency approval. Britain, Canada and the United States have already started vaccinating their citizens.

Germany's Bild newspaper reported that the EMA was now planning to meet on December 23, which Spahn said would be "good news for the whole

European Union".

"We can be optimistic about an approval on December 23," he said.

There was no immediate confirmation from the EU health body, however.

"We know about the Bild article. We are still working with a date of 29th, at the latest. At the moment nothing has changed," an EMA spokeswoman told AFP.

Spahn's growing impatience had become clear in a series of tweets on Sunday, in which he said the European vaccine delay could undermine confidence "in the European Union's ability to act".

The German hospital association (DKG) has likewise expressed concern about the time taken by the EMA to validate the vaccine.

Spahn has nevertheless defended Berlin's decision to stick with an EU-wide approval process for all 27 member states rather than going it alone and granting emergency use authorisation on a national basis.

'Summer 2021'

Opting for a European approach "is also about strengthening trust in the vaccine", the minister told reporters.

"We want a thorough review, we want a proper authorisation and at the same time we want a swift review," he added.

Berlin's irritation is more acute as BioNTech is a German firm and the country is preparing to go into partial lockdown from Wednesday, with non-essential shops and schools to close.

Germany coped relatively well with the first wave of

the coronavirus in the spring, but it has struggled to contain a resurgence in COVID-19 cases in recent months.

Last week saw a record high of nearly 30,000 new infections in one day, with the number of deaths also rising steadily.

Spahn told German television on Monday that once the product has been approved, he wants to vaccinate around 60 percent of the population by the end of summer 2021.

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