

EU pressures AstraZeneca to deliver vaccines as promised

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European Council President Charles Michel, left, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen leave after a joint news conference at the end of a EU summit video conference at the European Council headquarters in Brussels, Thursday, Jan. 21, 2021. European Union leaders assessed more measures to counter the spread of coronavirus variants during a video summit Thursday as the bloc's top disease control official said urgent action was needed to stave off a new wave of hospitalizations and deaths. (Olivier Hoslet, Pool Photo via AP)

The European Union lashed out Monday at AstraZeneca, accusing the pharmaceutical company of failing to deliver the coronavirus vaccine doses that it promised to the bloc despite getting EU funding to ramp up vaccine production.

The EU, already facing heavy criticism for a slow vaccine rollout around its 27 nations, also warned that within days it will demand approving any COVID-19 vaccines produced within the bloc for export.

"The European Union will take any action required to protect its citizens and its rights," Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides said.

The EU, which has 450 million citizens and the economic and political clout of the world's biggest trading bloc, is lagging badly behind countries like Israel and Britain in rolling out coronavirus vaccine shots for its health care workers and most vulnerable people. That's despite having over 400,000 confirmed virus deaths since the pandemic began.

The shortfall of AstraZeneca vaccine, which is expected to get EU medical approval on Friday, combined with hiccups in the delivery of Pfizer-BioNTech shots is putting member states under pressure.

The shortfall is all the more galling since Kyriakides said that the EU had paid 2.7 billion euros (\$3.28 billion) to several pharma companies to back the rapid development and ramp up the production potential of several vaccines.

Kyriakides immediately got the support from the bloc's largest member on the vaccine export controls plan.

"We, as the EU, must be able to know whether and what vaccines are being exported from the EU," German Health Minister Jens Spahn said. "Only that way can we understand whether our EU contracts with the producers are being served fairly. An obligation to get approval for vaccine exports on the EU level makes sense." Humanitarian deliveries would be exempt.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen held urgent talks with AstraZeneca chief Pascal Soriot, and EU nations also met with AstraZeneca to encourage the British-Swedish company to ramp up its vaccine production and meet its contractual targets.



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen speaks during a joint news conference with European Council President Charles Michel at the end of a EU summit video conference at the European Council headquarters in Brussels, Thursday, Jan. 21, 2021. European Union leaders assessed more measures to counter the spread of coronavirus variants during a video summit Thursday as the bloc's top disease control official said urgent action was needed to stave off a new wave of hospitalizations and deaths. (Olivier Hoslet, Pool Photo via AP)

"The answers of the company have not been satisfactory so far," said Kyriakides and added a follow-up meeting was planned late Monday.

The EU has committed to buying 300 million AstraZeneca doses with option on 100 million extra shots. Late last week, the company said it was planning to reduce a first contingent of 80 million to 31 million.

The European Medicines Agency is scheduled to review the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine Friday and its approval is hotly anticipated. The AstraZeneca vaccine is already being used in Britain and has been approved for emergency use by half a dozen countries, including India, Pakistan, Argentina and Mexico.

AstraZeneca's announcement that it will deliver fewer vaccines to the EU early on has only increased pressure on the 27-nation bloc, especially since Pfizer-BioNTech, the first vaccine to get EU approval, failed last week to keep up its promised deliveries to the EU. Pfizer has

temporarily reduced vaccine deliveries to the EU and Canada as it revamps its plant in Belgium to increase overall production. Italy has threatened to sue Pfizer for the delays.

The political pressure spurred the European Commission, which is the EU's executive, into action Monday, with von der Leyen's phone call to the AstraZeneca chief.

"She made it clear that she expects AstraZeneca to deliver on the contractual arrangements foreseen in the advance purchasing agreement," said her spokesman Eric Mamer.

"She reminded Mr. Soriot that the EU has invested significant amounts in the company up front precisely to ensure that production is ramped up even before the conditional market authorization is delivered by the European Medicines Agency."

The company said in a statement that Soriot "stressed the importance of working in partnership and how AstraZeneca is doing everything it can to bring its vaccine to millions of Europeans as soon as possible."

The delays will be make it harder to meet early targets in EU's goal of vaccinating 70% of its adult population by late summer.

The EU has signed six vaccine contracts for more than 2 billion doses, but only the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines have been approved for use so far.

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