

EU invites 'concrete' US plan on lifting vaccine patents

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European leaders do not think waiving patent protections on coronavirus vaccines is the best way to get more supplies to poorer countries

Europe on Saturday passed the ball back to Washington in a debate over COVID vaccine patents, pushing the US for a concrete proposal and a commitment to export much-needed jabs.

Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, speaking after a summit of EU and Indian leaders, said the EU had exported much of its own production and that America should follow suit.

"Now that a further part of the American population has been vaccinated, I hope that we can come to a free exchange of components and an opening of the market for vaccines," she said.

European Council chief Charles Michel said the bloc was ready to discuss a US offer to suspend patent protection on vaccines—once the details are clear.

"We are ready to engage on this topic, as soon as a concrete proposal would be put on the table," Michel said at an EU summit in Portugal that

discussed that subject, among others.

He added that the EU had doubts about the idea being a "magic bullet" in the short term and encouraged "all the partners to facilitate the export of doses."

France's scepticism was plain, with President Emmanuel Macron declaring "patents are not the priority".

A debate on the issue could be "a very good idea," Macron suggested, but he added: "I call very clearly on the United States to put an end to export bans not only on vaccines but on vaccine ingredients, which prevent production.

"The key to producing vaccines more quickly for poor countries and developing countries is to produce more, to lift export bans."

Italy's prime minister, Mario Draghi, echoed that.

"Before getting to the liberalisation of vaccines, other simpler things should be done, such as removing the export block that today the US firstly and the UK continue to maintain," he said.

"This, I would say, is the first thing to do," he said. "The fact of liberalising the patents, even temporarily, does not guarantee the production of the vaccine."

While at the summit, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a contract with drugs giant Pfizer/BioNTech for up to 1.8 billion doses of their patented vaccine had been concluded. Part of that supply is for EU exports to countries in need.

Influential voices support the push to waive patents, not least that of Pope Francis, who criticised putting "the laws of the market or intellectual property above the laws of love and the health of humanity".

The World Health Organization, India and South Africa have all called for patents to be temporarily suspended.

'Global cooperation' needed

The EU leaders' comments came on the second day of a summit that featured a bilateral meeting between the EU and India, where authorities on Saturday said the pandemic killed 4,000 people in a single day.

In a joint statement, both sides said "global cooperation" was needed to fight the pandemic and they "supported universal, safe, equitable and affordable access to COVID-19 vaccines, diagnostics and treatments".

"The vaccination process is not a race amongst countries but a race against time," they said, underlining the EU's contributions to the WHO-backed Covax facility and India's role producing many of the vaccine doses distributed around the world.

EU officials briefing journalists in Brussels on the issue of waiving patents said the hoarding of crucial ingredients needed for vaccines was a larger obstacle than patent protection.

The United States is not in a position to export COVID vaccine doses to countries in need because contracts it signed with vaccine-makers prevent their use outside of America, and the Defense Production Act restricts exports until Americans are vaccinated first.

That contrasts with the EU, which has sent more than 200 million doses abroad—as many as it kept for itself—prompting von der Leyen to describe the bloc as "the pharmacy of the world".

EU officials are worried that Washington's gambit to get around its own blockage by invoking a suspension of patents will end up painting Brussels as a villain if it does not follow suit.

An EU official briefing journalists on the complexities on the issue said on Friday that lifting patents, by itself, "will not fix things".

Technology transfer and training a vaccine-making workforce were also necessary, the official said.

Even if all those elements were in place, it would still take up to a year for a factory to start producing copycat vaccines.

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