

World Trade Organization calls for more production of vaccines



WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, left, told European Union legislators that normal market forces for exports and imports couldn't apply when it comes to the life-or-death issue of COVID-19 vaccines [File: Francisco Seco/AP Photo]

Rome, May 21 (RHC)-- The head of the World Trade Organization (WTO) said Thursday that it is of paramount importance to diversify vaccine manufacturing and to have more production taking place in Africa and Latin America to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the eve of a global health summit in Rome, WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala told European Union legislators that normal market forces for exports and imports couldn't apply when it comes to the life-or-death issue of COVID-19 vaccines, as many of the world's wealthiest nations were hoarding the shots for their own populations when the coronavirus crisis hit their home turf.

She said the world has the capacity to manufacture some five billion vaccine doses overall, but that as the virus has spread "we require twice and three times that. So the capacity was not there."

One of the main challenges is diversifying vaccine production, which is now 80 percent concentrated in 10 European, North American and South Asian nations, Okonjo-Iweala said, calling the situation a problem that "has come home to roost." "It's not normal that Africa, with 1.3 billion people, has 0.17 percent of the manufacturing capacity of the world," she said. "So this has to change." She added that Latin America has about 2 percent of global production capacity.

The summit set for Friday, co-hosted by the European Union's executive arm and Italy, is expected to draw the Group of 20 industrial and emerging-market nations, the heads of international organisations and representatives of global health bodies.

The European Union is set to raise many of the same points Okonjo-Iweala made, specifically looking to increase manufacturing production in Africa. EU nations have criticised a call by the US to waive COVID-19 vaccine patents as a way to increase supplies, arguing the move would yield no short-term or intermediate improvement and could even have a negative impact.

Okonjo-Iweala sought to remain neutral on the issue, but said WTO members could find flexibility to make sure more vaccines are produced in developing nations.

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