

France delays vaccine mandate on Caribbean islands amid protests

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Demonstrators have taken to the streets in Martinique and Guadeloupe over the past week to protest mandatory vaccination rules for health workers [Ricardo Arduengo/Reuters]

Paris, November 27 (RHC)-- France has postponed a mandatory coronavirus vaccination requirement for health workers in Guadeloupe and Martinique, after the measure spurred several days of widespread

protests and unrest in the French Caribbean territories.

In a statement on Friday, the French health ministry said the implementation of the vaccination requirement – also in place in mainland France – would be pushed back until December 31st to allow for dialogue.

Protests intensified in Martinique overnight, with French officials saying journalists and security forces had been attacked. “If the law of the Republic is to apply to all French departments, and therefore to Guadeloupe and Martinique, the details of its application must be adapted to the health and social situation of these two territories,” the health ministry said in the statement.

French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said on Friday that 10 arrests were made in Martinique and neighbouring Guadeloupe after several journalists and members of the security forces were targeted. “Everything is being done to find those responsible,” he wrote on Twitter.

Ten police officers were injured in Martinique on Thursday, including five by gunfire, the AFP news agency reported, citing police figures. Demonstrators have taken to the streets in Martinique and Guadeloupe during the past week to protest mandatory vaccination rules for health workers and other restrictions related to COVID-19.

In addition to ending the vaccination mandate, demonstrators have been calling for salary increases and lower petrol prices. Protesters have set fire to tyres and rubbish bins and blocked roadways over the past several days.

“Last night was clearly more intense than the nights before,” a spokesman for the French state in Martinique told Reuters on Friday. Reporters Without Borders said journalists from AFP, BFM TV, and Abaca Press were targeted with live ammunition while covering the outbreak of violence in Fort-de-France, Martinique, and called on the authorities to quickly investigate what happened.

AFP reported that men on a motorbike shot at four journalists, including a photographer from the news agency, late on Thursday, but no one was injured.

Martinique and Guadeloupe, islands of 375,000 and 400,000 people, respectively, are considered formal parts of France. The inhabitants of the islands have French citizenship and are allocated representation in the French National Assembly.

But the territories suffer higher poverty and unemployment rates than mainland France, and the protests have put a spotlight on local anger over broader issues with the French government.

“This is about many people in Guadeloupe feeling as if the French government [is] constantly telling them what to do, even though they are some 7,000 kilometres away in Paris,” Al Jazeera’s Natacha Butler reported earlier this week from Pointe-a-Pitre.

Sebastien Lecornu, France’s minister responsible for overseas territories, held videoconference discussions with Guadeloupean officials on Thursday and Friday in a push to reach a solution to the unrest. Lecornu is expected to travel “shortly” to the territories, AFP reported on Friday, citing an aide to the minister.

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