

Vaccine row escalates as France accuses UK of 'blackmail'

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Medical staff use a gurney to carry a patient infected with COVID-19 from a medical plane to a helicopter as part of his transfer from Nice, France, where intensive care units are overloaded [File: Lionel

Paris, March 27 (RHC)-- A row over COVID-19 vaccine access escalated Friday, with France accusing the United Kingdom of “blackmail” in its dealings with the European Union, and accusing Russia and China of misusing vaccines to boost their foreign policy clout.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian’s salvo came a day after the EU threatened to ban pharma firms from exporting coronavirus vaccines to the UK and other well-supplied countries until they make good on their promised deliveries to the bloc.

British-based AstraZeneca would likely be the first target of any such restrictions. The UK, Le Drian said, was under pressure because it lacked doses for second vaccine shots. “The United Kingdom has taken great pride in vaccinating well with the first dose except they have a problem with the second dose,” he told France Info radio.

“You are vaccinated when you have had both doses. Today there are as many people vaccinated with both in France as the United Kingdom,” he added.

According to data compiled by AFP, the UK has administered two vaccine doses to 4.1 percent of its population, against 3.9 percent overall in France. “You can’t be playing like this, a bit of blackmail, just because you hurried to get people vaccinated with a first shot, and now you’re a bit handicapped because you don’t have the second one,” Le Drian added.

Le Drian did not say what precisely constituted the alleged British blackmail, but UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson had warned earlier in the week that trade “blockades” would chill investment.

“I would just gently point out to anybody considering a blockade, or interruption of supply chains, that companies may look at such actions and draw conclusions about whether or not it is sensible to make future investments in countries where arbitrary blockades are imposed,” he told lawmakers.

The latest EU-UK row centres on an AstraZeneca plant in the Netherlands, which Johnson’s government claims as part of the British vaccine supply chain. Any suggestions of British vaccine selfishness have found robust responses in British media, with The Times accusing French President Emmanuel Macron of “evident anglophobia” and “petty jingoism”, and The Sun calling him “arrogant”.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s stark warning of a vaccine export stop came after a video summit of all 27 EU leaders and stoked fears that cross-Channel rivalry could damage global efforts to combat the pandemic.

France has made clear it sees vaccine policies feeding not just European, but global competition for influence. “We are looking at a new type of world war,” Macron said after the EU summit. “We are looking in particular at Russian and Chinese attacks and attempts to gain influence through the vaccine.” This situation, he said, meant the EU had to strengthen its own vaccine capabilities.

The French foreign minister on Friday also accused Russia and China of using their vaccines to gain influence abroad even before they had finished inoculating their own populations, a claim rejected by Moscow. “We absolutely disagree with the fact that both Russia and China are waging some kind of war,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists. “And we absolutely disagree with the fact that Russia and China are using the coronavirus pandemic and vaccines as tools of influence.”

Russia and China have, for their part, accused Western countries of hoarding vaccines to the detriment of poor nations. Russia has applied to the EU regulator the European Medicines Agency (EMA) to gain approval for the use of its Sputnik V vaccine in the 27-nation bloc, but is still waiting for an answer.

The German government said Friday that it would be open to using Sputnik V once it had EMA approval. In the meantime, the developers are pushing Sputnik V – named after the Soviet-era satellite – in other regions and say the jab has been registered in 55 countries around the world.

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