

West debates sharing patents as patients die in droves

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Experts insist COVID-19 patent waivers could take years to negotiate. (Photo by AFP)

Brussels, May 9 (RHC)-- Major Western European countries have expressed reservations about a proposal to waive patent rights on COVID-19 vaccines -- now backed by U.S. President Joe Biden -- insisting that key to ending the coronavirus outbreak was faster manufacturing and sharing the vaccine.

This new development came as experts emphasized that waivers could take years to negotiate, and would not address the immediate need to rapidly manufacture more doses of the vaccines, saying that while the pandemic rages on across the globe, it is highly likely that even more dangerous new variants of the contagion will emerge.

The pharmaceutical industry in the United States and Western Europe, however, insists that the most expedient approach is to overcome existing production bottlenecks, and sell or donate vaccines to other countries around the world.

French President Emmanuel Macron said the question of sharing patents was not the issue of the day, slamming Britain and the U.S. for blocking the export of vaccines and their ingredients to the wider world.

EU leaders, meanwhile, were due to discuss the suggestion to share vaccine intellectual property at a two-day summit that opened in the Portuguese city of Porto on Friday, but remained divided on its usefulness. Some EU officials argue that it could take two years to agree on the waivers in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), most likely making it irrelevant to the current pandemic.

"What is the current issue? It is not really about intellectual property. Can you give intellectual property to laboratories that do not know how to produce and will not produce tomorrow?" Macron said prior to attending the summit.

"The main issue for solidarity is the distribution of doses," the French president added, noting that France was working hand in hand with Germany on the issue. Berlin expressed its opposition to the patent waiver proposal on Thursday.

This is while the EU, which is among the biggest producers of vaccines in the world, is also the major exporter, with 200 million doses already shipped outside the bloc. The U.S. and Britain, however, have not exported any of the vaccines they have made.

Lashing out at both the U.S. and the UK, Macron said: "In order for the vaccine to circulate, the ingredients and the vaccines themselves cannot be blocked. Today the Anglo- Saxons block many of these ingredients and vaccines."

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen echoed Macron's remarks, saying during a press briefing after the first day of the Porto summit that the EU should be open to a discussion on the patents but added that sharing the technology was no quick remedy for the pandemic. "In the short and medium term, the IP waiver will not solve the problems, it will not bring a single dose of vaccine in the short and medium term," she added.

"No one will be safe until we all are. If vaccination takes place only in developed countries, our victory over Covid-19 will only be short-lived. We are seeing how quickly the virus is mutating, creating new variants that entail new challenges," the leaders of Belgium, Sweden, France, Denmark and Spain said in a joint letter to the Commission.

"Vaccines have become security policy and the EU cannot afford to lag behind; to this end, an increased European production capacity will be a key priority," they emphasized.

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