

Germany is gripped by ‘third wave’ as EU tackles vaccination woes



A protective face mask sign in Romerberg Square in Frankfurt, Germany, on Jan. 29, 2021. — ALEX KRAUS/BLOOMBERG

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Germany’s health minister warned that the country is in the grip of a “third wave” of rising coronavirus cases as Europe tries to get its stalled vaccination program back on track.

“The numbers are rising, the share of mutations is large and there are some fairly challenging weeks ahead of us,” Health Minister Jens Spahn said Friday at a news conference in Berlin, adding that there isn’t enough vaccine supply in Europe at the moment to halt the surge.

Germany and other European Union countries are trying to reset their inoculation campaigns after a chaotic week of suspensions, health scares, and export-ban threats. Countries across the bloc on Friday resumed using AstraZeneca’s covid-19 vaccine after temporarily suspending it to investigate a possible blood-clot issue. But while the European Medicines Agency has cleared the shot for use, worries among citizens may linger.

Further muddying the waters, France’s public-health agency on Friday recommended that the Astra vaccine should only be given to people aged 55 and older, as cases of clotting occurred mostly with people younger than that. The government in Paris said it would follow the agency’s advice.

The stubbornly high infection rate in Germany — mirroring the situation across the continent from France to Italy and the Czech Republic — raises the prospect

that lockdown restrictions in Europe's largest economy may be prolonged into next month or even sharpened, and a cautious reopening announced at the start of the month delayed.

Germany's coronavirus cases rose by the most in two months in the 24 hours through Friday morning, days before Chancellor Angela Merkel hosts talks to decide on the next steps in the country's strategy to contain the virus.

The seven-day incidence rate per 100,000 people continued to climb, rising to 95.6, the highest in more than a month and close to the threshold at which Merkel and regional officials agreed to reimpose restrictions.

Under the guidelines, curbs should be reinstated if the local incidence rate rises above 100 for three consecutive days, although several cities and regions have chosen to disregard the so-called "emergency brake."

It will take "some weeks" for people most at risk to be fully inoculated, even if promised deliveries arrive on schedule, and only then can there be a discussion about lifting restrictions, Spahn warned.

Merkel and regional leaders are due to hold their next round of talks on Monday. Remaining lockdown restrictions — including the closing of non-essential stores, hotels, restaurants and gyms, as well as cultural venues — are due to expire on March 28.

Karl Lauterbach, a lawmaker for the ruling Social Democrats who is a trained epidemiologist, said the recent rise in cases makes stricter curbs inevitable. "It doesn't make any sense to wait," Lauterbach said at the news conference alongside Spahn.

He urged Germans to avoid travel over the Easter vacation, saying it would inevitably "fire the third wave" and make it much harder to get the virus under control.

An increasing number of Germans would support a tightening of the lockdown, an opinion poll published Thursday suggested. Among 1,207 people surveyed by infratest dimap for ARD, 32% said the current curbs are not stringent enough, 12 percentage points more than at the start of this month. The share that said they think the restrictions are adequate fell to 38% from 47%.

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