

Germany enlists industrial giants for protective gear procurement

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BASF is using 'local contacts' to get hold of medical equipment

Berlin is enlisting German multinationals and their networks of contacts abroad, especially in China, to secure protective clothing and equipment in the fight against the coronavirus, the health ministry said Friday.

"Centralised" mask buying has been introduced "to protect as best we can people fighting the coronavirus in doctors' offices, hospitals and care homes," health minister Jens Spahn said.

"Around 37 million protective masks" had reached Germany by the end of this week, Spahn added.

A health ministry spokeswoman had earlier said that "the health ministry procures directly, but we are also in contact with a whole string of companies... who may be able to help".

And a spokesman for chemical giant BASF confirmed that its "employees are on a government procurement team" known as the Task Force Personal Protective Equipment (TFPSA).

"In China, BASF experts are currently working with other companies and their local contacts to help procure and transport medical protective clothing and equipment such as face masks that are urgently needed in Germany," the spokesman said.

Car giant Volkswagen also confirmed that it was involved in the push for supplies.

'Wild West'

A global rush to secure vital gear for medical personnel as they treat virus-infected patients has sent prices soaring and led to unprecedented scenes in producer countries.

French regional leaders told AFP that shipments of masks they had ordered were snapped up by American buyers as they stood ready for departure on the tarmac at Chinese airports.

"The Americans took a shipment from us, we've identified a load they outbid us on," said Valerie Pecresse, head of the Ile-de-France region that encompasses capital Paris and its surroundings.

Berlin city politicians said Friday a shipment of 200,000 masks intended for its police force had been hijacked from an airport in Thai capital Bangkok on their way from China.

"We see this as an act of modern-day piracy," Berlin interior senator Andreas Geisel said, urging the German government to remind Washington to "comply with international rules" rather than resort to "methods from the Wild West".

Health minister Spahn said he was unaware of the specific incident in Bangkok but said reports of this kind had been coming in and "are generally not a good development".

Logistics company Fiege, another private partner in the government's procurement plans, said "Fiege transports (medical protective) goods under police protection" even within German borders to prevent them going astray.

Many German hospitals, medical practices and care homes still report shortages of protective equipment.

Hopes the German military's procurement arm could speed up acquisition have been disappointed, as most of the gear so far has been procured directly by the health ministry.

A shipment of six million masks ordered by the military went missing at an airport in Kenya in March, the defence ministry confirmed last week.

The Robert Koch Institute (RKI) responsible for disease control reported

Friday 76,696 confirmed coronavirus infections in Germany, an increase of more than 6,000 in 24 hours.

So far over 1,000 Germans have died of the COVID-19 disease.

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