

EU, Africa at odds over vaccine patents ahead of summit

February 14 2022



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The EU on Monday stood by its refusal to lift patent protections on COVID vaccines, just days ahead of a summit with African Union countries who see the issue as a priority.

Since October 2020, India and South Africa have led calls at the World Trade Organization for the temporary removal of [intellectual property](#) protections for vaccines, treatments and diagnostics in the fight against COVID-19.

Proponents argue this would boost production globally and help address the glaring inequity in access between rich and poor nations.

The members of the African Union have pushed to include the demand in the conclusions of the joint EU-AU summit that starts on Thursday in Brussels.

"The African Union... urges the European Union to engage constructively towards the conclusion of a targeted and time limited waiver," said the AU proposal seen by AFP.

But a number of wealthy countries hosting large pharmaceutical companies have opposed the move, saying patents are not the main roadblocks to scaling up production and are crucial to innovation.

"We think that intellectual property should never be a brake (to [vaccine](#) production)," said Franck Riester, the trade minister from France, which currently holds the EU's rotating presidency.

"At the same time, we do not want to call into question a system of intellectual property that allows for innovation and that has made it possible, in particular, to have vaccines very quickly in the case of COVID-19," he added.

Riester was speaking after holding talks with his EU counterparts on the matter in the French city of Marseille in which WTO chief Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala also took part.

Okonjo-Iweala in January said a deal at the WTO on easing restrictions to manufacturing vaccines was weeks away, possibly in time for the EU-AU summit.

But on Monday ministers said they hoped for a WTO accord no earlier than June.

Irish deputy prime minister Leo Varadkar, whose country is home to several big pharma groups, said it "is very important that we're willing to make compromises and that we're willing to make sure that vaccines are available in all parts of the world".

"But what we want to avoid is this pandemic being used in a way by some countries to undermine innovation or undermine intellectual property," he added.

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Citation: EU, Africa at odds over vaccine patents ahead of summit (2022, February 14) retrieved 11 July 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-02-eu-africa-odds-vaccine-patents.html>

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