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EU's Covid Vaccine Export Curbs Ensnare Other Shots in Italy

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Italy's customs agency is holding up a shipment of GlaxoSmithKline Plc meningitis vaccine and plans to test its contents amid growing suspicion that drugmakers may try to export coronavirus vaccine batches out of the European Union.

The shipment, worth about \$10 million, has been sitting at Rome's airport awaiting testing for about a week, according to two people familiar with the matter who declined to be identified. Glaxo confirmed the delay, saying the semi-finished batch was bound for its production site in Marietta, Pennsylvania.

The incident comes as the EU threatens to halt vaccine exports if their manufacturers don't deliver the doses pledged to the 27-nation bloc's immunization campaign. Glaxo doesn't produce any approved vaccines for Covid-19, however, and its blocked shipment may turn out to be collateral damage in an increasingly acrimonious fight over scarce vaccine supplies.

The U.K. drugmaker's Italian unit said by email that the U.S.-bound shipment is being held by customs in Rome, where it awaits export permission -- a certification process it described as "routine." A spokesperson for Italy's customs agency declined to comment.

The shipment raised suspicion because it contained unlabeled vials, the people said. Their content will be tested on Monday, they said.

Glaxo's Delays

EU leaders last week backed a plan to expand the bloc's power to restrict vaccine exports. Another U.K. pharma company, AstraZeneca Plc, is the target of the new measures after delivering only about a quarter of the doses pledged to the bloc, which has sent more shots to the rest of the world than it has given to its own people.

Italy's customs agency has been on high alert for any unauthorized Covid-related pharmaceutical shipments, the people said. Last week, Italian officials found 29 million doses of Astra's vaccine at a vial-filling plant in the town of Anagni, an hour's drive south of Rome.

While Astra, working with the University of Oxford, was among the leaders in developing a pandemic shot, Glaxo has suffered setbacks. The company is working with partners including Sanofi and Canada's Medicago Inc. The collaboration with Sanofi has encountered delays, while a partnership with Sichuan Clover Biopharmaceuticals Inc. ended.

Last month, the company also agreed to work with CureVac NV to help boost production of the German drugmaker's experimental vaccine and improve the shot to help protect against multiple variants.

— With assistance by James Paton