

Covid-19: the chaos and blunders behind the mask shortages in France — January-March 2020

Thursday 16 April 2020, by [PHILIPPIN Yann](#), [ROUGET Antton](#), [TURCHI Marine](#) (Date first published: 2 April 2020).

In a televised address on Monday evening when he announced the lockdown on public movement to contain the Covid-19 virus epidemic is now extended into May, French President Emmanuel Macron admitted “our country was not sufficiently ready for this crisis”. But while the unpreparedness can be traced back to its predecessors, the French government has failed with its strategy for the urgent procurement of a vital piece of equipment that frontline healthcare staff sorely lack: protective masks. In this second investigation into the fiasco, Mediapart details the blunders that continue to place healthcare workers in danger, and how the business world has been more effectively provided for than hospitals.

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While the French government has now recognised the importance of a widespread use of protective face masks amid the Covid-19 epidemic, this second in-depth investigation by Mediapart into the situation shows that the authorities are still unable, three months after the beginning of the health crisis, to import sufficient amounts to meet France's most elementary needs, beginning with the protective gear needed by frontline medical staff.

According to estimations by *ActuSoins* [[1](#)], a French magazine for the nursing profession, and based on incomplete national figures which suggest an even higher toll, almost 3,000 healthcare workers in the country have now been infected by the coronavirus.

Mediapart's investigation, based on information provided by numerous documents, some confidential, and first-hand accounts, including from within state institutions and private corporations, reveal that:

- Volumes of mask supplies at present fall well below announced targets, representing a rhythm of supply that in theory would require two years to reach the health ministry's pledge of obtaining 2 billion masks.
- In March, when the covid-19 epidemic had already become a major crisis, the French government missed the opportunity of importing tens of millions of masks, including the much-needed FFP2-class

masks for healthcare staff, via companies that had been officially recognised as reliable sources.

- The continuing incoherence of the government's strategy is illustrated by the supply to industry, with the help of the authorities, of tens of millions of masks while frontline health workers are still in desperate need of them.

Missed opportunities

Masks classified in Europe as FFP2 are, along with the even higher performing FFP3, the only class of mask that offers protection to the wearer from airborne virus contamination, unlike surgical masks which offer protection to others from airborne infectious matter exhaled by the wearer. The FFP2s are therefore a critical piece of protection for healthcare staff who are in close contact with patients infected by the Covid-19 virus, and worldwide demand for supplies of the mask is currently huge.

Information obtained by Mediapart indicates that, during the month of March, several senior staff surrounding French health minister Olivier Véran received email offers from French companies proposing their services for the massive and rapid importation of face masks, notably including FFP2s, but that they chose to ignore the propositions.

On March 21st, four days after the emergency national lockdown on public movement was introduced in a bid to slow the Covid-19 epidemic, the French authorities had a stock of just 5 million FFP2 masks at their disposal. The distribution of FFP2s is still today subject to drastic rationing in France, and there are many among hospital workers, general practitioners and members the fire brigade – who in France also provide emergency ambulance services – who are without them, despite their regular exposure to the Covid-19 virus (see Mediapart's previous investigation here).

Lucas – not his real name, which is withheld like many others here who agreed to be interviewed on condition of anonymity – runs a company importing goods into France. During the first half of March, 'Lucas' wrote to several advisors of the French health minister offering to help with the shortage. "At the time, I was capable of delivering 20 million FFP2s per month," he said. "there wasn't the rush that there is today." Mediapart has seen one of the emails he sent the ministry staff in which he provided his professional credentials, explaining that a Chinese manufacturer with which he works was able to provide 3 million masks per week, and which could begin delivering them to France eight days later. He says he never received a reply of any sort from the ministry.

In its investigation published on April 2nd, Mediapart cited the case of 'Julien' (not his real name), an expert in sourcing industrial produce from China, where he had been based for ten years. On March 15th, Julien sent a detailed proposal to the health ministry in which he said he had identified Chinese factories capable of supplying France on a weekly basis with between 6-10 million surgical masks, including 1 million FFP2 masks.

Julien had detailed the proposition to the ministry after contacting the head of France's health administration, the Direction de Générale de la Santé (DGS), Jérôme Salomon, who in turn directed him to Antoine Tesnière, the health minister's Covid-19 advisor. In a written exchange with Julien dated March 13th, Salomon said that, in the search for masks, "I assure you that we are looking in all directions".

On March 16th, Julien spoke on the phone with Antoine Tesnière's deputy. According to Julien, she told him that the unit had no need of help because it had its own network in China. In an exchange of text messages that Mediapart has seen, Julien's Chinese suppliers said they had not been

contacted by the French state.

"I was shocked, because in three days I had found them reliable factories, which had the capacity, the certification and the authorization to export, but they didn't do a thing," said Julien.

The health ministry told Mediapart that Julien's offer, like that of several others, was rejected because it lacked "reliability". In a separate written reply to Mediapart's investigation, sent on April 1st, the ministry declared: "To auto-proclaim oneself as a serious interlocutor has never constituted the proof in itself that that is actually the case."

That statement was at best misleading. While not the case of Julien, several professional import intermediaries who told Mediapart their offers of help in obtaining masks were ignored by the French authorities have, since late March, been officially recognised by the economy ministry as reliable importers and as such recommended to French corporations seeking mask supplies, according to documents seen by Mediapart.

The professionals helping with the imports of masks are often small businesses, from retailers to medical equipment suppliers, whose experience in trading with China allows them to source mask supplies in the country.

As well as the case of Lucas, Mediapart has identified three other French businesses also officially referenced by the economy ministry as being recommendable and whose offer of sourcing masks for health establishments were ignored by the health ministry.

Nearly all requested that their real identities be withheld. One of these was 'Fernand', with several years' experience in importing medical equipment from China, who became concerned at the beginning of March at the reported shortages in French hospitals. He emailed an advisor to health minister Olivier Véran to propose his services.

Fernand said he was able to obtain several million surgical masks from China for healthcare workers within the space of three weeks. His email prompted no response, nor even an acknowledgment that it had been received. "I was surprised, I made several attempts without success," he told Mediapart. To the suggestion that the ministry may have considered his proposition to be unreliable, he said: "Yet I supply major groups quoted on the stock exchange."

Bernard Malaise, who was happy to be cited here under his real name, runs a small IT company called ID Services, and has worked for more than ten years with Chinese industrial suppliers. On March 21st, he too contacted the health ministry to offer his help in obtaining mask supplies. That same day, health minister Olivier Véran had given a press conference, with a lengthy address about the situation of mask supplies. "During his speech on Saturday March 21st, the Minister of Health indicated that the stocks of FFP2 masks in France were down to 5 million," recalled Malaise.

Importantly, the weekly consumption of FFP2 and surgical masks has, despite numerous restrictions, climbed to 40 million items. Malaise knows the situation only too well; his siter has worked for more than 30 years at the Accident and Emergency (A&E) service of the Cochin Hospital in Paris, one of the largest in the capital. "What she is living through today with her peers is unprecedented," he said. "Every day, every night I think about it."

Over the weekend of March 21st-22nd, Malaise attempted in vain to contact the health ministry to propose sourcing mask supplies from China. Early the following week, his company took it upon itself to import supplies of masks. "We are one company among thousands of small- and medium-sized others in France," said Malaise. "Without any assistance or outside aide, we are in the process

of taking delivery of 5 million surgical and FFP2 masks in less than four weeks.”

He said that, like other staff at ID Services, he is at his office “24 hours on 24”, and “rests just a few hours here and there” on a camp bed. He predicts that in less than a month from now, “we’ll have imported for France more than 10 million masks”. His company is supplying masks to small- and medium-sized businesses and industries for anti-viral protection for their employees, but is also giving away thousands of them to healthcare professionals. “It’s little with regard to the needs of our country,” he said of the volume the company is importing, “but it’s enormous for the use that we make of them.”

“It has to be said that concerning the importation of masks, in particular the FFP2 masks, the failure of the administration and large groups who were close, or not, to the government is patent,” Malaise observed.

Another importer recommended by the economy ministry, with established relations with Chinese industrials, Franck (not his real name) was also in a position to supply masks to the health ministry. Mediapart understands that a member of the French government’s inter-ministerial group that manages state purchasing orders had reached an advanced stage of discussions with him for the provision of 20 million FFP2 masks, to be delivered within a matter of weeks. But for unexplained reasons the order was suddenly interrupted during the last week of march, shortly before it was to be signed. “I don’t want to be too hard on the state,” said Franck. “I told myself that they had a plan to supply the healthcare workers quicker, which is essential.”

The chaos behind the state’s mass mask orders

During his lengthy presentation during the March 21st press conference, health minister Olivier Véran, while detailing the shortfall in the number of masks then in stock, announced that France had placed orders for a total of 250 million masks, mostly from Chinese suppliers.

The government was so sure of its ability to secure supplies that it published, in the official register, the Journal officiel, a decree dated March 20th that lifted the requisitioning of all available masks and which allowed local authorities and the business sector to directly place their own orders in parallel with those of the state. The importation firms who had until then offered their services to the government were re-directed to a “mask unit” set up at the economy ministry which advised companies on recommended intermediaries for importing masks (see further below). In short, the government was signalling to the latter that it no longer needed help in obtaining masks for the healthcare sector.

On March 28th, Véran was joined by Prime Minister Édouard Philippe at a press conference when it was announced that the initial order of 250 million masks had now been supplanted by further orders for a total of 1 billion masks. Then, on April 1st, Véran told members of the National Assembly, the parliamentary lower house, that even that amount had grown to “more than one and a half billion” masks. Three days later, in an interview with French online news magazine Brut, the minister said the orders were by then for “not far off 2 billion” masks.

In reality, behind the galloping numbers of mask orders announced by the authorities, was a situation that was far from clear. In his successive accounts, the health minister never gave comparable figures; they sometimes concerned orders placed with Chinese manufacturers, at other times included the production from manufacturers in France (who were turning out 8 million masks per week). Even a response from his ministerial cabinet given to Mediapart on April 1st, shortly before publication of its first investigation into the situation, contradicted itself by claiming the 1

billion figure of March 28th was an order solely with Chinese manufacturers - while at the same time indicating it included production in France.

Furthermore, the health minister never detailed how many FFP2 masks, which are those that healthcare workers need most, were included in the total numbers of masks ordered. According to an unnamed source from France's health administration body, the DGS, cited by *France Info* public radio, the orders for 1 billion masks announced on March 28th included just 78 million FFP2s.

Contacted by Mediapart, the health ministry did not respond to the question submitted to it of exactly how many masks have been ordered from China nor how many FFP2 masks these included.

What is clear is that the government's massive orders are with just four large suppliers in China -Aden, Fosun, BYD and Segetex EIF (a French firm whose biggest production plant is in China). This risky strategy was illustrated by a written circular issued on March 23rd to businesses and local authorities by central government, and also by regional prefects (its administrative representatives), confirming that they could now go about directly placing their own orders for masks but requesting that they avoid "if possible" placing orders with these "four preferential suppliers of the state" (see one example below).



Above: one of the circulars, issued by the prefect for the Ain département (county) of eastern France requesting that local authorities avoid placing orders with the four Chinese mask producers chosen by the government. © Document Mediapart

Segetex EIF, the only French-owned company among the four suppliers in question, has a mask production plant in Roanne, in central France, but crucially a far bigger plant in China. However, that is based in Wuhan, the Chinese city that was the original epicentre of the Covid-19 virus outbreak, at the end of 2019. As a result, while most of the Chinese suppliers, based outside the region, were authorised to resume exports at the end of February, the Segetex plant only finally gained permission to resume production on April 2nd. The question that raises is whether it was wise of the French government to place orders in March with a supplier whose production lines were then closed. Contacted by Mediapart, neither Segetex EIF nor the health ministry offered any comment.

Meanwhile, Aden (formerly Aden Services), another of the four suppliers from China, is a self-described specialist in "Integrated Facility Management", which essentially involves providing businesses with services such as site cleaning, catering and security. It was established in the mid-1990s by Joachim Poylo, the son of a French shipowner from Le Havre, in northern France, and now declares a payroll of around 25,000. The company's activities appear little linked to the production of medical equipment and does not appear on the Chinese government's official list, issued in early April, of mask producers authorised for exports. Mediapart contacted Aden and the French health ministry to ask if the company's role was in fact that of securing mask suppliers for Paris, but neither responded.

BYD is a major Chinese industrial group, specialised in battery production and vehicle manufacturing, notably electric and hybrid vehicles. In January, when the Covid-19 epidemic was at

its peak in China, it rapidly reconverted one of its industrial plants for the production of masks. In a statement issued in March [2], it claimed to have created “the world’s largest mass-produced face masks plant”, with a production capacity of 5 million masks per day.

Fosun is the largest privately owned conglomerate in China, with branches in healthcare equipment manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, finance, and the leisure sector (which in France includes its ownership of the Club Med holiday camps). Like other Chinese corporations, it was closely involved in attempts to contain the Covid-19 epidemic in the country during the winter, and while the group does not manufacture masks, it went about buying millions on the international market, notably in Europe. After the virus crisis became a worldwide pandemic, Fosun bought around 2.6 million masks for use in the US, Italy, the UK and France.

Mediapart contacted the group for precise details about its role in the vast orders for masks that were announced by the French authorities in March, but it referred questions to the French health ministry. Questioned, the latter did not respond. In its reply to Mediapart, Fosun confirmed it was not a producer of masks but that it was involved in mobilising its “global resources” to help countries affected by the pandemic.

The French authorities have kept silent about the nature of the contracts with the four corporations, disclosing no information about the amounts of masks ordered from each one, the costs and the timetable for supplies.

France’s foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian last week told French rolling news channel *BFMTV* that he had acted in China as “the broker” for health minister Olivier Véran, notably to “identify” potential suppliers, but there is no clear information about the conditions in which the four were chosen, whether the orders were negotiated in part or in full with the Chinese authorities nor whether the latter presented guarantees on the rhythm of supplies. Contacted about these issues by Mediapart, Le Drian did not provide a response.

Several French importers who were contacted by Mediapart described the French government’s strategy of choosing just four large corporations for its supplies while ignoring the services of smaller medical equipment providers as being a highly risky, and even absurd, arguing that all mask production sources should have been called upon and as quickly as possible. “It’s not four big suppliers that the state should have picked in such an urgent situation, but 20,” said one medical equipment importer whose firm is recommended on the French economy ministry’s list of recommended businesses. “The demand is such in China that it’s necessary to multiply import channels.”

Indeed, three weeks after the first announcement of mass orders for masks, the supplies have so far been arriving in only small quantities.

The missing “billions” of masks

At the joint press conference of French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe and health minister Olivier Véran on March 28th, the latter described the supplies of imported masks were organised via “a tight and intensive air bridge between France and China”. The mention of an air bridge, an expression often used in emergencies in conflict zones or during humanitarian crises, conjured images of incessant round trips, which was no doubt at the time reassuring for the healthcare services in desperate need of the masks.

According to a report in French daily *Le Monde*, the French authorities began looking for the

logistical service provider for the imports on the weekend of March 21st-22nd, just after the announcement of orders placed for 250 million masks. It was finally Geodis, a subsidiary of the French railways operator SNCF which was chosen, again in circumstances surrounded by secrecy. Neither the authorities nor Geodis offered any detail on the conclusion of this public contract, and both declined to comment when questioned by Mediapart.

On March 30th the first of the aircraft involved in the operation arrived in France, carrying 8 million masks, at Vatry airport 150 kilometres east of Paris, in a well-executed PR operation filmed and photographed by the media.

Soon afterwards, Geodis released details of its “air bridge” operations to the press. It said it had signed a contract with Russian air freight transporter Volga-Dnepr for the use of Antonov 124 aircraft, the world’s second-largest cargo transport plane capable of transporting more than 10 million masks each. Geodis announced four weekly round-trips with China, representing a total of 16 arrivals between then and the end of April.

But as the health minister himself admitted, just two flights carrying masks ordered by the French authorities arrived during the first week, on March 30th and April 1st, with a combined total of 21 million masks. Mediapart understands that last week the situation was the same, with two flights arriving at Vatry airport – one on Wednesday, the other on Thursday – loaded with around 20 million masks ordered by the state.

“Between March 30th and April 9th, we’ve received eight planes loaded essentially with masks,” Yoann Maugran, the head of cargo operations at Vatry airport, told Mediapart. Five of those flights were chartered by Geodis, and Maugran estimated that each Antonov 124 carried “between 8 and 10 million” masks. Geodis works with both the state and the private sector, and it was unclear what was the final destination of the masks carried on the fifth of its chartered flights that arrived over the same period at Vatry.

National carrier Air France and French container transport and logistics company CMA-CGM have each said they are participating in the imports of masks from China, but they both refused to answer Mediapart on the question of whether these included orders submitted by the French authorities.

Yoann Maugran told Mediapart that 49 million masks had been landed over recent weeks at Vatry airport, of which “about 70% to 80%” related to orders placed by the authorities, confirming Mediapart’s estimation that these amounted to around 40 million masks.

On April 11th, the head of the French health administration, Jérôme Salomon, speaking during what has now become a daily update on the situation of the epidemic in the country, said France had up to then received delivery of just 35 million masks from China. The ‘air bridge’, he said, “was going well”.

But that is a surprising statement given that the Antonov cargo planes operated by Geodis are rotating supplies from China at only half the rate that was planned, and are delivering weekly supplies of just 17.5 million masks, which are less than half the amount used across France every week. Since March 21st, and amid continuing strict rationing of masks, notably FFP2s, the weekly consumption is around 40 million per week.

At the current rhythm, it would take two years to complete deliveries of the announced orders of 2 billion masks, foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told BFMTV on April 7th that “the ordered masks will arrive [...] between now and the end of June”.

Whether the shortfall in the numbers of ordered masks arriving is down to Geodis or the four China-based suppliers with which the government entered into contract remains uncertain, but according to the French health minister it is a consequence of the situation in China. “Because China faces the threat of a re-emergence of the virus on its own territory, it needs to prepare itself,” Olivier Véran said in his April 4th interview with Brut. “And so it’s not because we buy and order masks that they will necessarily be delivered to the plane and then land in France. It is a daily issue to be able to make sure that these masks that we have ordered are produced properly and that they get here [...] It is also an enormous diplomatic job.”

His comments appeared to confirm that despite the vast numbers of masks ordered, France has obtained no guarantee from its suppliers about the volumes of weekly deliveries, depending rather on the goodwill of the Chinese authorities. Véran said all countries faced the same problem of fierce competition for supplies, and that “France is among the countries who placed orders the soonest”.

That statement is contradicted by the findings of Mediapart’s major first investigation published earlier this month into the shortage of mask supplies, notably the aggravation of the shortage caused by ignoring the offers made to the authorities by several import businesses in March. Furthermore, these were redirected, via the economy ministry, to supply companies.

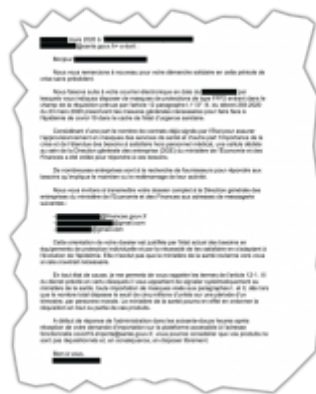
Business world receives better treatment than hospitals

On March 21st the French government took the decision to end its monopoly on access to mask supplies. Until then, it could requisition supplies that it did not directly control, such as those in the private sector or with local authorities. But that weekend in March, despite having no guarantees regarding the true volumes of masks it would receive from its vast orders destined mostly for healthcare staff, it published a decree that allowed the nearly total liberalisation of mask imports. Only non-state orders of 5 million masks or more over a period of three months could, under certain conditions, be requisitioned if the need arose. It was a risky move.

As soon as the decree was published, the economy and finance ministry created a “masks unit” within its administration dedicated to business activity, the Direction générale des entreprises (DGE). The unit, which is independent of the inter-ministerial team in charge of mask supplies for healthcare workers, is dedicated to helping companies import masks for their employees.

Three DGE staff were mobilised to identify and call potential import suppliers and verify their credentials. If these were deemed reliable sources, they were included on a list of recommended importers that was made available to companies. The DGE little difficulty finding such importers given that the health ministry had passed on the details of those who had offered it their help in equipping healthcare staff before March 21st, and others who proposed similar services after that date were directly placed in contact with the DGE.

The latter are sent an email with a standard message, and Mediapart has gained access to one of those received by an importer (see below). “Considering on the one hand that the number of contracts already signed by the State to ensure the supply of masks for the health services, and on the other the importance of the crisis and the extent of the needs to be satisfied outside of healthcare staff, a dedicated unit has been created within the general-directorate for companies (DGE) at the Ministry of the Economy and Finance to respond to those needs,” it reads. “Numerous companies are seeking suppliers in order to respond to the needs of the maintenance or re-starting of their activity.”



Above: a copy of an email sent by the health ministry to an importer proposing their services to obtain supplies of masks. © Document Mediapart

While the email notes that this re-direction does not exclude the possibility that “the Ministry of Health gets back to you if that proves necessary”, the message is broadly that the state is satisfied it has made adequate provisions for the health service and that it is now necessary to serve the business world to ease the effects of the virus epidemic upon the French economy.

In less than a week, the DGE unit had completed a table of recommended importers. Mediapart obtained a copy of the document at the date of March 30th, on which 32 importers were listed.

Another document drawn up for the use of companies concerned the “air bridge with China”. This listed contacts for air transport forwarding agents and was intended to help with the organisation of deliveries of imported masks at a time of a sharp drop in air traffic. It included the companies Bolloré Logistics, Ceva Logistics (a subsidiary of CMA-CGM), and Geodis (which was in charge of organising the deliveries of government-ordered masks).

The documents were sent out to companies via professional federations, including the Fédération du commerce et de la distribution (FCD) which represents supermarket chains. The lists were accompanied by a note (see below) which insists that orders for masks must be “massive”, and that major purchasers should “order masks in very large volumes and beyond their own requirements” in order to redistribute “in a logic of national solidarity” the surplus elsewhere in their business sector. It added that orders should be “immediate” because “the capacity for production in China are in the process of being very quickly saturated”, and that “there is urgency for placing orders and to set in place regular influxes”.



Above: an extract from the advisory note on mask orders sent to French companies by the economy ministry. © Document Mediapart

Two weeks on, the system appears to be a success. According to Mediapart’s estimations, businesses and local authorities – which have also placed large orders for mask imports – have succeeded to date in obtaining a total of at least 50 million masks. That is well above the 40 million masks that Mediapart has identified as being delivered to the state for distribution to healthcare workers.

Contacted by Mediapart, the prime minister’s office and the ministries of health and the economy

declined to comment on those estimations.

On March 30th, an Air France plane chartered by Bolloré Logistics landed to wide media coverage at Paris-Charles de Gaulle airport carrying 2.5 million masks that were to be offered to the state by luxury goods firm LVMH, and another 3 million that had been bought by companies, including supermarket chain Casino. Meanwhile, another 10 million masks ordered by businesses have transited via Vatry airport. Mediapart has learnt that another 13.5 million masks for company employees arrived at Paris-Charles de Gaulle airport last Thursday on a Qatar Airways Cargo flight. Many dozens of millions more were expected to arrive around the Easter weekend.

The French government's change of position on the wearing of masks in public and the workplace, finally recognising the importance of the protection they offer, the demand from businesses of all sizes has leapt, notably in anticipation of the eventual end of the current lockdown on public movement. Amid the rush, small- and medium sized businesses with established ties in China have proven particularly effective in securing supplies.

"Financial power is really not the best argument in order to work in confidence with Chinese factories," commented Bernard Malaise, head of small IT company ID Services and who had tried in vain to help the health ministry source mask suppliers in China (see page 1). He underlines the importance of close relations established over several years with Chinese suppliers.

"A mask is a medical device, something that is too often forgotten, and buying or importing medical devices from China isn't something that can be just made up," commented Thibault Hyvernât of medical packaging company Sterimed, which has two sites in China. "Some large French groups got thrashed and come to us now."

The demand for masks is such that prices for Chinese-made surgical masks have grown 15-fold since the beginning of the year, from 2 US cents per piece to 30 US cents. "When you are in competition with people who pay cash without even making the effort to check the goods, you are bound to lose out," said Gian Luigi Albano, a former head of research and development at the Italian procurement agency Consip, interviewed for a recent investigation [\[3\]](#) into the dubious practices of the international trade in medical equipment by public radio *France Inter*.

One of the importers recommended by the French economy ministry told Mediapart that paying for supplies at the moment of placing their orders, "states accept doing so for their orders, and even that no longer suffices".

Olivier Colly, head of a small medical supplies company, Medicofi, who claims he is able to import "10 million masks this month" from China, says that the main problem in obtaining supplies is in logistics. "In normal times, 80% of freight was carried in airliners, under the passengers," he said. "But Shanghai today is a real battlefield. A filled-up cargo plane, normally 300,000 euros, now costs 1 million euros, and the Americans can go to 1.5 or 2 million [euros]." He argues in favour of the alternative of rail transport. "I never envisaged it before, but it turns out to be more reliable, with a [travelling] time of 19 days between China and France, via Russia, Poland and Germany."

Thibault Hyvernât of medical packaging company Sterimed, who said he imported 2.5 million masks earlier this month, said his next import of 3 million masks, expected to arrive in about a week, will be transported by Air France which, he said, "took out the seats in a passenger aircraft".

Meanwhile, since April 1st, the Chinese authorities have introduced new restrictions on manufacturers to ensure the quality of the production, including reducing the number of companies allowed to export masks to a list of around 500. "That has meant a complete review of all our supply

networks,” said Max Braha-Lonchant of French company Luquet-Duranton, specialised in healthcare administration applications.

“The Chinese customs services are increasingly pernicky,” said French importer Pierre-Michel Rogozyk. “Before, you needed three or four documents at customs, now you need seven or eight. You have to put yourself in their place. For China, it’s a question of international reputation. It’s a healthcare product that everyone wants, 130 countries all need masks at the same time. The Chinese want things to be perfect. It’s a crunch moment for them.”

According to Chinese commerce ministry spokesman Gao Feng, speaking at a press conference on April 9th, a total of 130 countries and 14 international organisations have signed, or are in the process of signing, contracts with Chinese companies for the supply of medical equipment. According to data from China’s customs administration, the country supplied 3.86 billion masks worldwide between March 1st and April 4th. “In two months, from January to March, my supplier set up 33 production lines,” commented Oliver Colly.

On April 10th, *China Daily*, the English-language organ of the ruling Chinese Communist Party, announced on Twitter [4] that, “Chinese customs authorities on Friday announced it will do quality checks on 11 medical export products that are essential to #COVID19 control [5] and treatment, including medical masks, protective suits, googles, and ventilators” and that the move “takes effect immediately”. One import businessman, who asked for his name to be withheld, said he feared this would lengthen the time to clear mask exports through customs formalities to between one and two weeks. “Between the moment when the order is taken and the moment when it will arrive in France, a month will go past,” he told Mediapart. “There is a danger that there’ll be major ruptures of supplies for France.”

An incoherent French government strategy

In his interview on April 4th with *Brut*, health minister Olivier Véran said that the opening up of direct orders for imports of masks by companies and local authorities was “not a great success, alas”. Mediapart’s investigation, however, demonstrates the contrary.

The success of the non-state orders has become a major political problem for the government, as dozens of millions of masks pass under its nose and its own orders for vast volumes are arriving in a trickle. As a result, the French state requisitioned, on April 2nd and 5th and with the help of the army, a delivery of several millions of masks on the tarmac of Bâle-Mulhouse airport in eastern France close to the border with Switzerland. The masks had been ordered by the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté regional council of east-central France (with a population of 2.7 million), and the council of the Bouches-du-Rhône département (county) that surrounds the Mediterranean port city of Marseille in the south (population 2 million). The move, the first of its kind since the decree in March, prompted outrage from the councils, who had placed their separate orders to equip the staff of care homes for the elderly and dependent, called Ehpads, and also homecare workers.

Complicating matters was the fact that the Regional Health Agency (ARS) responsible for the Grand Est region (population 5.5 million) in north-east France had also passed an order for 6 million masks which were due to arrive on the same early April flights at Bâle-Mulhouse airport. The ARS told Mediapart that these were supplementary to “national strategic stocks” and were to supply various public establishments caring for dependent handicapped people and the socially marginalised “as well as self-employed healthcare professionals”. The problem was that the volume of masks that arrived on the two flights was less than the combined orders, and the local prefecture (a government

administration) ordered the requisition to ensure that the regional ARS was served first.

According to French daily *Le Monde* [6], that controversial decision led to a videoconference held on April 9th between health minister Olivier Véran, interior minister Christophe Castaner and the presidents of the three associations representing France's mayors and members of regional and département councils, when the ministers admitted that requisition had been "an inopportune method" and pledged that no such move would be repeated without prior warning. The daily cited the president of the south-east Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region, Renaud Muselier as saying that, "Everyone is ordering masks, but no-one wants to say so out of fear of seeing them requisitioned by the state".

Until now, there have been no reports of the requisitioning of arrivals of supplies of masks for the private sector, and the government declined to reply to Mediapart's request for clarification of this.

Mediapart has been told that the economy ministry's DGE department has requested that companies keep it updated on a weekly basis, and via a computing tool, about the numbers of masks they have ordered and of those they have received.

The government decree published on March 21st allows for the requisitioning of supplies of masks that number more than 5 million. Because supplies destined for local authorities are for distribution among essential services, such as care homes for the elderly and dependent, it might appear reasonable that the ceiling for requisitions be lowered in the case of supplies for businesses. Mediapart submitted that question to the ministries of health and the economy, but neither responded.

One mask importer, whose name is withheld, admitted he was "afraid of being requisitioned" in the future. "It's not a problem in itself if there is an urgent need," he said. "But at no moment has the government told us when we would afterwards be paid and at what rate. What do we do if we've already paid for the merchandise and have a client to be delivered?" On this question also, the economy ministry failed to reply to questions submitted by Mediapart.

There were some among importers who are recommended to businesses by the economy ministry who told Mediapart that they had decided to refrain from ordering FFP2 masks for ethical reasons. "I don't import them, for me they should be reserved for healthcare staff, who don't have enough," said one of them, Christine Tarbis, head of À Pas de Géant, a company that sells decorative and promotional objects.

Another importer recommended by the ministry, who asked to remain anonymous, suggested that the supplies of masks could be organised differently. "I think that a single centre of supplies for the whole country could be opened, managed by the biggest logisticians," he said. "We [could] fill up this warehouse, which then supplies everyone, from the neighbourhood baker who has to reopen his business to the major hospitals, and by defining priorities." He said he had set out the idea in emails to several ministerial advisors. "They no doubt don't have the time to organise that," he said. "They are doing their best and they have to act fast."

Junior economy minister Agnès Pannier-Runacher previously declared that the ministry's "business unit" sought mask supplies from "smaller-sized" Chinese manufacturers and that "the larger volumes" were given priority for orders placed by the French state. But that appears contradicted by events. "We have very big companies listed on the CAC40 [*French stock market index*] who are ordering 7 million masks, and who divide it between two suppliers to be sure," said importer Pierre-Michel Rogozky. "A [bulk-buying] grouping of pharmacists came to see us for 120 million surgical masks. We're trying to see what we can do."

Even some hospitals, which are supposed to be supplied by the state, are trying to order supplies directly through those importers recommended by the economy ministry to businesses. "I had requests from hospitals, but I couldn't honour them because of not finding a solution to the financing terms," said importer Mathieu Madec, whose company GMAD is based in Angers, north-west France. "These establishments are not in a position to put money upfront for millions of masks." He said has joined up with a forwarding agent to find a solution for healthcare establishments. "I have the ability to find masks, he has private planes able to carry out weekly rotations with 6 million masks onboard," he explained. "And we have a grouping of ten hospitals that are interested. We might be able to make it."

Antton Rouget, Yann Philippin et Marine Turchi

P.S.

- MEDIAPART. APRIL 14, 2020:
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/140420/covid-19-chaos-and-blunders-behind-mask-shortages-france?onglet=full>
- English version by Graham Tearse.
- The original French version of this investigation by Mediapart is available on ESSF.
- If you have information of public interest you would like to pass on to Mediapart for investigation you can contact us at this email address: enquete@mediapart.fr. If you wish to send us documents for our scrutiny via our highly secure platform please go to <https://www.frenchleaks.fr/> which is presented in both English and French.

Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.actusoins.com/327036/soignants-contamines-le-point.html>
- [2] <https://en.byd.com/news-posts/byd-opens-worlds-largest-face-mask-manufacturing-plant/>
- [3] <https://www.franceinter.fr/intermediaires-douteux-concurrence-entre-etats-revelations-sur-le-far-west-de-l-equipement-medical>
- [4] <https://twitter.com/PDChina/status/1248512287335481344>
- [5] https://twitter.com/hashtag/COVID19?src=hashtag_click
- [6] https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/04/10/coronavirus-l-etat-tente-d-eteindre-sa-guerre-des-masques-avec-les-collectivites-locales_6036169_3224.html