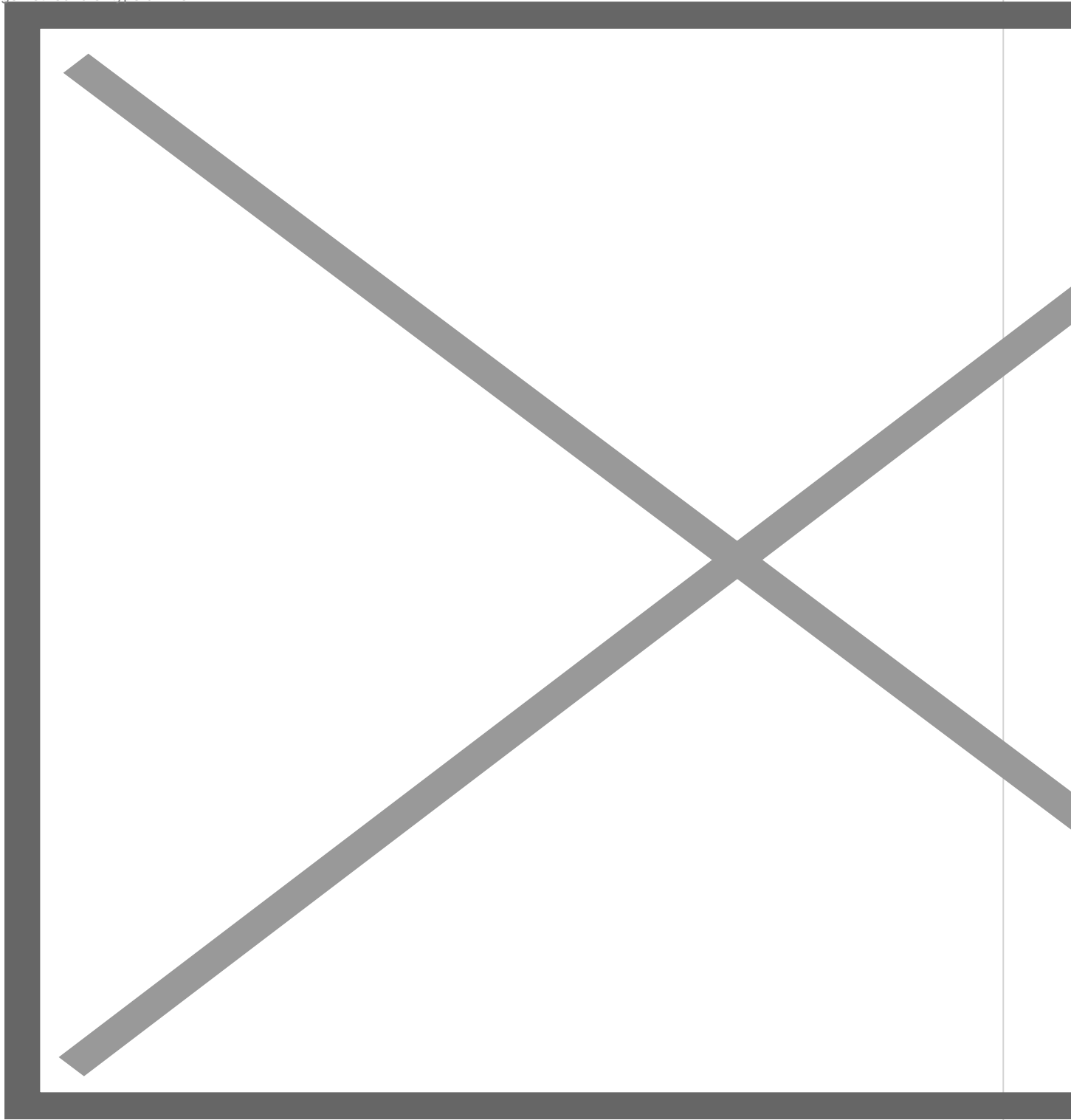


Mexico begins COVID vaccine roll-out, joined by Chile and Costa Rica

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Mexico City, December 24 (RHC)-- Chile and Costa Rica have begun a roll-out of coronavirus vaccinations on Thursday, joining Mexico to be among the first Latin American countries to begin mass

immunization campaigns.

Mexico started its mass vaccination program, with a nurse the first to be shown receiving the jab in the country with one of the world's highest COVID-19 death tolls. The televised launch came a day after the first 3,000 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine arrived by courier plane from Belgium.

Medical personnel were first in line as vaccinations began in Mexico City, the epicentre of the current wave of infections. The Central American country now has more people hospitalised for COVID-19 than it saw at the peak of the first wave of the pandemic in late July.

The Health Department says 18,301 people are in hospitals across Mexico being treated for the disease that can be caused by the coronavirus. That is 0.4 percent more than in July. In Mexico City, the capital, some 85 percent of hospital beds are in use.

The state of Morelos, just south of the capital, became the fourth of Mexico's 32 states to declare a "red" alert, which will lead to a partial lockdown and the closure of non-essential businesses starting Thursday.

Mexico has recorded more than 1.3 million cases of COVID-19 and more than 120,000 deaths linked to the disease, the fourth-highest death toll in the world, according to a Johns Hopkins University tally.

Meanwhile, the first 10,000 doses of a 10-million order of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine reached Chile on Thursday with inoculations of health workers in the hardest-hit sectors to begin immediately.

Chile is the first South American country to begin vaccinating against COVID. Costa Rica also received its first shipment of the Pfizer doses on Wednesday, while Argentina received an initial batch of about 300,000 doses of Russia's Sputnik COVID-19 vaccine on Thursday.

The vaccine arrived at Ezeiza International Airport, in the suburbs of Buenos Aires, on a special flight of carrier Aerolineas Argentinas from Moscow, according to Reuters news agency witnesses and images shown on local television.

Officials in Argentina, the third country to approve the Sputnik vaccine after Russia and Belarus, said they plan to start administering the vaccine in the coming days.

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