

First batch of coronavirus vaccines arrives in South Africa

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The new coronavirus strain, different from the one in the UK, appears to be more infectious than the original virus in South Africa. (Photo: Jerome Delay / AP)

Pretoria, January 31 (RHC)-- South Africa, the continent's worst COVID-hit country, is receiving its first batch of coronavirus vaccines on Monday. Initially scheduled for the end of January, the first one million shots of the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine produced in India will be used to inoculate healthcare workers over the next three months. The second batch of 500,000 jabs is scheduled to arrive later in February.

Despite criticism from opposition parties and medical experts that the procurement process of the vaccine has taken too long, Minister of Health Zweli Mkhize has called the arrival of the vaccines from the Serum Institute of India "a massive achievement of unprecedented proportions."

Once the consignment has undergone quality checks, which are going to take between 10 and 14 days, the country will begin its long-awaited, three-phase immunization campaign. Following the inoculation of front-line healthcare workers, other high-risk groups such as the elderly, people with comorbidities and essential workers such as minibus drivers, police and teachers are going to receive their shot. The third phase targets everyone else above the age of 18.

The arrival of the jabs comes a month after the United Kingdom was the first to roll out the vaccine developed by the University of Oxford and the pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca, and some two months after the UK and the United States began using the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

Responding to accusations that the delay was caused by the South African government starting negotiations too late, Deputy Director-General for the National Department of Health Dr Anban Pillay told Al Jazeera: "We could not procure a vaccine without knowing that it is effective, safe and when it would be delivered. This info only became available in December for some vaccines. We had to wait to have this info before we make a financial commitment."

Under its agreement, South Africa is paying \$5.25 per shot, \$2 more than what is going to cost when the same vaccine arrives within the deal the African Union (AU) has secured for African countries.

Professor Barry Schoeb, who chairs the Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on COVID-19, said South Africa prioritised the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine as "it is the one that was immediately available."

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