



Bhutan receives 150,000 doses of India-made COVID-19 vaccine



Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj hands over the vaccine consignment to the Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering in a ceremony held at Paro International Airport on 20 January.

Sonam Penjor

A gift of 150,000 Indian manufactured COVID-19 vaccines to Bhutan arrived in the country on 20 January. The consignments were received within five days of the launch of the world's largest vaccination drive in India under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 16 January 2021.

The Government of India (GoI) has provided 150,000 doses of the vaccine to the Royal Government of Bhutan as a testimony to the special relationship and uniquely close friendship between India and Bhutan.

A press release from the Indian Embassy stated that this consignment is a gift from the people and Indian Government to the people and Government of Bhutan. Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj handed over the vaccine consignment to the Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering in a ceremony held at Paro International Airport on 20 January.

An Indian aircraft AN32

carried the entire consignment of 'Made In India' vaccines into Bhutan. Bhutan is the first country to receive the vaccine from India.

Handing the gifts to Bhutan and some other neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Maldives and Nepal Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had stated: "We are committed that India's vaccines, our production capacity, serve the interest of the whole of humanity."

Prior to the delivery of the vaccines, a training program covering administrative and operational aspects was conducted on 19-20 January 2021 for immunization managers, cold chain officers, communication officers and data managers from Bhutan, both at national and provincial levels.

India has also provided training to Bhutanese healthcare professionals to enhance and strengthen their clinical capabilities under the Partnerships for Accelerating Clinical Trials program.

Meanwhile, the govern-

ment stated Bhutan will vaccinate its entire people together. Lyonchhen Dr Lotay Tshering said: "We would roll out the nationwide vaccination program only when we have sufficient doses for all the targeted population."

"Once we have the required number of doses, our plan is to vaccinate the entire population in their respective communities, gewogs and chiwogs in one week. We are well on track with health facilities and human resource planning. That time, movement of people will be stopped for one week," Lyonchhen said.

After the first dose of vaccine, Lyonchhen said that the second dose of the vaccine would be administered in the same arrangement four weeks after the first dose.

The country requires around 1,200,000 doses of vaccines to vaccinate for an estimated 533,000 targeted population. However, those population who are 18 years and below, pregnant and breastfeeding women, people with immune

compromised state comprise of terminally ill, HIV patients among others are the non-authorized groups from COVID-19 vaccines.

"It is important we roll out the nationwide vaccination on an auspicious date. Upon consulting with Zhung Dratshang, we were informed of *dana* (inauspicious month) which falls between 14 February and 13 March. We will wait until the period is over," Lyonchhen said, adding as we wait we will also get to learn from experiences, possible side effects and lessons of other countries who have rolled out the vaccination programs.

The reason for deciding to vaccinate everyone together is in the advantage that can derive from it. Lyonchhen said that administering the first dose for all at the same time enhances the convenience to inject the second dose together.

"This means we are ensuring same level of immune protection for all if vaccinated over same period of time. This also enables arranging

booster doses together when or if required. And this can increase the overall efficacy of the vaccine for the general population and minimize or blunt any outbreaks, even in the event of a worst case situation in the post vaccine era," the PM said.

Lyonchhen said opting to spread the vaccine roll out over months could lead to unsystematic coverage and varying levels of protection for different individuals. This will complicate the follow up dosages and subsequent boosters if required.

Meanwhile, as a reflection of the special bonds of trust and understanding between India and Bhutan that have existed over decades, the GoI had earlier also handed over ten consignments of medical supplies, portable X-Ray machine, essential medicines and medical equipment.

"Going forward India would continue to stand by Bhutan, in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic," stated the press release.