



BHUTAN FIRST COUNTRY TO RECEIVE COVID-19 VACCINE FROM INDIA

COVID-19

By Tenzin Lhamo
in Thimphu

Bhutan received 150,000 doses of Covishield vaccines from India on 20 January, just four days after India's own massive rollout, making Bhutan the first country to receive the Indian vaccine.

An Indian military aircraft flew it to the Paro international airport at around 3:30pm on Wednesday. A delegation of senior government officials led by Lyonchhen Dr Lotay Tshering and Health Minister Dechen Wangmo were handed over the vaccine consignment by Indian Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj.

Laytshog Lopen Sangay Dorji of the central monastic body presided over the prayers for auspicious endeavor and conducted a purification rite (thrusol) of the consignment.

The Indian embassy said that the consignment was a 'gift from the people and Government of India to the people and Government of Bhutan'. The first 150,000 doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, locally manufactured in India under the name Covishield has been received as aid.

The consignment of 150,000 doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, Covishield for Bhutan will be stored in Thimphu for nearly two months by which time the government hopes to have

procured the over 1.2 million doses that will be required to inoculate the entirety of the population. Once that number is reached, the jabs are to be administered to the whole country within a week.

Receiving the vaccine, the Prime Minister said, was only further proof of the deep friendship with India who has been with Bhutan throughout every difficulty.

"As we celebrate the arrival of the vaccine as the new milestone in our battle to beat the pandemic at home, we applaud the gesture that signifies the compassion and generosity of the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, and the people of India for the wellbeing of humanity."

Entire Bhutanese population to be vaccinated in same week

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Contrary to initial plans for the vaccination of high-risk sections before the rest of the population, Prime Minister Dr. Lotay Tshering announced plans that the vaccination plan had now changed to the simultaneous inoculation of the entire Bhutanese population within the same week.

The government will be rolling out the Covid-19 vaccines only after procuring sufficient doses to vaccinate the entire 533,000 eligible population in the country. This count includes foreign workers currently in the country.

Given that the current vaccines are administered in two doses, around 1.2 million doses will be required to begin the mass vaccination programme.

Over 550,000 people in the country will be eligible for the vaccine and more than 250,000 including children below 18 years of age, pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers will not be vaccinated.

The new strategy is being adopted in order to better understand the impact of the vaccine and also to ensure that the whole population was afforded protection given the possibility of transmission from vaccinated to non-vaccinated sections of the population.

The logistics of the arrangement is also an added advantage as administering the first dose for all at the same time enhances the convenience to inject the second dose together. This method ensures the same level of immune protection for all, vaccinated over the same period of time.

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The period would provide some time to learn from the experiences of other countries where the vaccination has started, including possible side effects from the vaccines.

The arrangement also enables arranging booster doses together when or if required.

Bhutan first country to receive Covid-19 vaccine from India

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Dr Lotay acknowledged the importance of the gesture particularly since India was still in the middle of the fight and facing enormous challenges.

"It is of unimaginable value when precious commodities are shared even before meeting your own needs, as opposed to giving out only after you have enough."

Many Bhutanese took to social media to echo these sentiments, acknowledging

India's help and friendship. The opposition party, Druk Phuensum Tshogpa, also posted a letter of gratitude to the Indian government on their Facebook page hailing their friendship and solidarity in these difficult times.

The dispatch of the vaccine is clear testimony to India's commitment of "neighborhood first" and its leadership in the global fight against COVID-19.

The contribution of 150,000 vaccines prepares Bhutan to move forward to protect the

people and heal from the pandemic, together with the rest of the world. India has also extended timely and generous support through the supply of medicines, medical equipment and personal protective equipment since March last year.

The Indian government has further assured Bhutan that it will cover the full requirement of Bhutan's target population of slightly over 533,500 and has committed to deliver the remaining consignments soon.

The vaccine will only be rolled out after the country has the required number of doses which comes to around 1.2 M doses for the eligible population of about 533,000 to ensure the same level of immune protection for all.

Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering said that the vaccine drive is expected to start only in mid-March after the month-long Dana (inauspicious month) from February 14- March 13.

The vaccine, Covishield, is manufactured by the Serum

Institute of India. It is a weakened version of a common cold virus found in Chimpanzees called the adenovirus and has been modified to look more like the coronavirus. The vaccine needs a storage temperature between 2C and 8C and the two doses are administered four to 12 weeks apart. India is the largest manufacturer of the world's vaccines, producing about 60% of the global supply.



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"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," said the PM.

Opting to spread the vaccine roll out over months could lead to unsystematic coverage and varying levels of protection for different in-

dividuals which would complicate the follow-up dosages and subsequent boosters if required.

The Lyonchen said that Bhutanese citizens living abroad would also be given the vaccines. These Bhutanese can contact their respective Embassies to get the vaccine. If a separate programme in the host country requires payment for vaccination, His Majesty the King will cover

the costs through the respective embassies.

Once the required number of doses is procured, the government plans to vaccinate the entire eligible population in their respective communities, dzongkhag, gewogs and chiwogs in one week.

The government has already undertaken infrastructure and human resource planning for the mass vaccination. Once the vaccine

administration starts, the movement of people would be stopped for a week.

The second dose of the vaccine would also be administered in the same arrangement four weeks after the first dose. Lyonchen said that the Government of India has also expressed solidarity and committed to supporting the country in vaccinating its entire population for free. However, he said that even if

the country had to pay for the vaccines, arrangements were ready.

He said that if the government were to pay for the vaccines, the country would be spending around USD 6M.

Lyonchen said, "Since the vaccine is approved for emergency use, people will have the choice to reject the vaccine".