



Chinese Vaccines Sweep Much of the World, Despite Concerns



TAIPEI, Taiwan - The plane laden with vaccines had just rolled to a stop at Santiago's airport in late January, and Chile's president, Sebastián Piñera, was beaming. "Today," he said, "is a day of joy, emotion and hope." The source of that hope: China – a country that Chile and dozens of other nations are depending on to help rescue them from the COVID-19 pandemic.

China's vaccine diplomacy campaign has been a surprising success: It has pledged roughly half a billion doses of its vaccines to more than 45 countries, according to a country-by-country tally by The Associated Press. With just four of China's many vaccine makers claiming they are able to produce at least 2.6 billion doses this year, a large part of the world's population will end up inoculated not with

the fancy Western vaccines boasting headline-grabbing efficacy rates, but with China's humble, traditionally made shots. Amid a dearth of public data on China's vaccines, hesitations over their efficacy and safety are still pervasive in the countries depending on them, along with concerns about what China might want in return for deliveries. Nonetheless, inoculations with Chinese vaccines already have begun in more than 25 countries, and the Chinese shots have been delivered to another 11, according to the AP tally, based on independent reporting in those countries along with government and company announcements.

It's a potential face-saving coup for China, which has been determined to transform itself from an object of mistrust over its initial mishandling of the COVID-19 outbreak to a savior. Like India and Russia, China is trying to build goodwill, and has pledged roughly 10 times more vaccines abroad than it has distributed at home. "We're seeing certainly real-time vaccine diplomacy start to play out, with China in the lead in terms of being able to manufacture vaccines within China and make them available to others," said Krishna Udayakumar, founding director of the Duke Global Health Innovation Center at Duke University. "Some of them donated, some of them sold, and some of them sold with debt financing associated with it."

China has said it is supplying "vaccine aid" to 53 countries and exports to 27, but it rejected a request by the AP for the list. Beijing has also denied vaccine diplomacy, and a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson said China considered the vaccine a "global public good." Chinese experts reject any connection between the export of its vaccines and the revamping of its image. "I don't see any linkage there," said Wang Huiyao, president of the Centre for China and Globalization, a Beijing think tank. "China should do more to help other countries, because it's doing well." China has targeted the low- and middle-income countries largely left behind as rich nations scooped up most of the pricey vaccines produced by the likes of Pfizer and Moderna. And despite a few delays of its own in Brazil and Turkey, China has largely capitalized on slower-than-hoped-for deliveries by U.S. and European vaccine makers.

Like many other countries, Chile received far fewer doses of the Pfizer vaccine than first promised. In the month after its vaccination program began in late December, only around 150,000 of the 10 million Pfizer doses the South American country ordered arrived. It wasn't until Chinese company Sinovac Biotech Ltd. swooped in with 4 million doses in late January that Chile began inoculating its population of 19 million with impressive speed. The country now has the fifth highest vaccination rate per capita in the world, according to Oxford University. Chilean Vilma Ortiz got her Sinovac shot at a school in Santiago's Nunoa neighborhood, along with about 60 other people. Although she considers herself "kind of a skeptical person," she said she researched the Chinese vaccines on the Internet and was satisfied. "I have a lot of faith and confidence in the vaccine," she said.

In Jakarta, the sports stadium was abuzz as masked healthcare workers filed in to receive their Sinovac shot. Wandering the rows of vaccination stations was Indonesian President Joko Widodo, the first person in the Southeast Asian country to get the Chinese shot, 140 million doses of which he has ordered for his people. Among those at the stadium was Susi Monica, an intern doctor receiving her second dose. Despite questions over its efficacy, getting the shot was worth it to her, particularly because she didn't have any adverse reactions to the first dose. (Source: Associated Press)

VP Harris Appeals to Americans to Take COVID Vaccine in NBA All-Star Appearance



Vice President Kamala Harris on Sunday appeared ahead of the NBA All-Star Game and appealed for Americans to take COVID-19 vaccines, as President Joe Biden's administration seeks to counter vaccine hesitancy among African Americans. "I'm urging everyone to get the vaccine when it is your turn. I've taken the vaccine," said Harris, the first Black American to serve as vice president, in clips from a conversation with actor and producer Michael B. Jordan broadcast ahead of the game.

"It's about understanding that it's bigger than you. It really is an extension of love thy neighbor and it will save their life," said Harris. Harris has been making similar appeals to Black Americans in recent weeks, in response to distrust in vaccines.

A Reuters poll in December found 49% of Black Americans said they would be interested in taking the COVID-19 vaccine, compared to 63% of white Americans.

Experts say that can be traced to decades of unequal healthcare access and treatment, under-representation in clinical trials and a history of medical horror stories, such as the infamous "Tuskegee Study" that left African-American men with syphilis untreated without their knowledge to observe the course of the disease. (Source: Reuters)

U.S. Government to Ship 18.5 Million Doses of COVID Vaccine this Week, White House Says



The White House said on Tuesday that the government will distribute around 18.5 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines this week, fewer than last week because no new doses of Johnson & Johnson's vaccine are ready to be sent out.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said at a news briefing that the U.S. government plans to distribute 15.8 million doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccine to states, tribes and territories, along with 2.7 million doses going to pharmacies.

Last week, the U.S. government distributed over 21 million doses of all three vaccines. That included over 3.5 million doses of the newly authorized J&J vaccine. J&J's manufacturing has been slower than expected, and the company was not expected to be able to deliver any doses of its vaccine this week.

It is expected to resume shipments of the vaccine later in March. As of Tuesday morning, more than 123 million doses of the vaccines had been distributed in the United States and 93.7 million shots had been administered, according to data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (Source: Reuters)

Quad Meet To Announce Financing To Boost India Vaccine Output: Report



Washington: A first ever leaders' meeting of the Quad group of countries on Friday plans to announce financing agreements to support an increase in manufacturing capacity for coronavirus vaccines in India, a senior U.S administration official told

The financing agreements will be between the United States, Japan and others and focus particularly on companies and institutions in India manufacturing vaccines for American drug makers Novavax Inc and Johnson & Johnson, the official, who did not want to be identified by name, said.

The aim of the initiative by the Quad, which groups the United States, India, Japan and Australia, would be to reduce manufacturing backlogs, speed vaccination, and defeat some coronavirus mutations, the official said.

"The idea is that the quicker you can vaccinate, the more that you can defeat some of these mutations. So this is a capacity that will come online later this year, and it will substantially increase our capacity, collectively," he said.

Some of the additional vaccine capacity created in India would be used in vaccination efforts in South-east Asian countries, the official added.

The White House announced earlier on Tuesday that President Joe Biden will participate in an online Quad meeting on Friday, the first leader-level meeting of a group seen as part of efforts to balance China's growing military and economic power.

White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said she expected a range of issues facing the global community to be discussed "from the threat of COVID, to economic cooperation and ... the climate crisis."

India has urged the other Quad members to invest in its vaccine production capacity in an attempt to counter China's widening vaccine diplomacy (Source: NDTV)

Covid-19: No Herd Immunity In 2021, WHO Warns



MOSCOW—The European Medicines Agency has started a rolling review of Russia’s Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine, many months after it was first approved for use in Russia and after dozens of countries around the world have authorized it.

In a statement Thursday, the European regulator said the review is based on results from lab studies and research in adults, which suggests the vaccine may help protect against the coronavirus.

Despite skepticism about Russia’s hasty introduction of the vaccine, which was rolled out before it had completed late-stage trials, the vaccine appears to be safe and effective. According to a study published last month in the journal *Lancet*, Sputnik V is 91% effective and appears to prevent inoculated individuals from becoming severely ill with COVID-19, although it’s still unclear if the vaccine can prevent the spread of the disease.

With a global shortage of COVID-19 vaccines, some experts say boosting the use of vaccines made by China and Russia — which have not been as in demand as those made by Western companies — could offer a quicker way to increase the global supply. The pandemic has already infected over 115 million people, killing over 2.5 million of them, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.

The EMA has so far approved three COVID-19 vaccines for use across the 27-nation European Union: shots made by Pfizer-BioNtech, Moderna and AstraZeneca. It could license a fourth shot made by Johnson & Johnson at an expert meeting next Thursday. The EMA has not set a date for when its expert group might meet to assess Sputnik V data but the rolling review aims to expedite the authorization process, which can typically take months. Dr. Hans Kluge, the World Health Organization’s regional director for Europe, called the EMA announcement on Sputnik V “good news.”

“We desperately need to enlarge our portfolio of vaccines, so I see this as a very welcome development,” Kluge said. In the meantime, dozens of countries have already authorized Sputnik V for use — including EU member Hungary — and many have agreed to purchase millions of doses of the shot.

Kirill Dmitriev, CEO of the Russian Direct Investment Fund that bankrolled the development of the vaccine, said Thursday that “vaccine partnerships should be above politics and cooperation with EMA is a perfect example, demonstrating that pooling efforts is the only way to end the pandemic.” “Following EMA approval, we would be able to provide vaccines for 50 million Europeans starting from June,” Dmitriev added. The European Commission, the EU’s executive arm, said Thursday it is not looking to add the Russian vaccine to its portfolio at this stage.

“No talks are ongoing between negotiation teams and the producers, or institutes, or companies or organizations behind the Sputnik vaccine,” said Stefan De Keersmaecker, the Commission’s health policy spokesman. The RDIF has been pushing for the EMA to review Sputnik V for months, with Dmitriev first announcing an application to the European regulator in November. In January, the EMA met with the developers of the vaccine.

Although there was considerable scientific skepticism when Russia unrolled its vaccine without completing advanced trials, many doubts have since been assuaged with the publication of its latest research. Experts said Russia’s initial immunization campaign was marred by “unseemly haste, corner cutting and an absence of transparency.”

Sputnik V uses a modified version of the common cold-causing adenovirus to carry genes for the spike protein into the coronavirus to prime the body to react if COVID-19 comes along. That’s a similar technology to the vaccine developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University. But unlike AstraZeneca’s two-dose vaccine, Sputnik V uses a slightly different adenovirus for the second booster shot, a factor that some scientists say may account for its apparently high efficacy rate.

The World Health Organization is also considering whether or not to issue an emergency use approval for Sputnik V; officials last month were awaiting further details from its Russian developers. That approval would be essential for any Sputnik V vaccines to be used in the U.N.-backed COVAX program to try to distribute vaccines fairly to nations around the world, but COVAX has not yet signed any deals for Sputnik V.

Questions have been raised in the West over Russia’s eagerness to export its vaccine amid its comparatively slow domestic vaccine rollout — officials say nearly 4 million people, less than 3% of Russia’s population of 146 million, have received the shots so far. “I must say we still wonder why Russia is offering theoretically millions and millions of doses while not sufficiently progressing in vaccinating their own people,” European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov retorted that Russia’s vaccination campaign is going at “normal” rates, adding that the international demand for Sputnik V is “so high that it significantly exceeds (Russia’s) production capacity.” The RDIF says it has received requests for 2.4 billion doses of the two-shot vaccine, enough to immunize 1.2 billion people, from over 50 countries. According to Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, Russia has so far produced just over 10 million doses. (Source: Associated Press)

1 in 5 Hospitalised Covid-19 Patients With Diabetes Die in 28 Days: Study



The study's preliminary investigation had found that 10.6 per cent of patients with type 2 diabetes and Covid-19 and 5.6 per cent of those with type 1 diabetes and Covid-19 died within a week after hospitalisation.

The researchers carried out further investigation, which was published in the journal *Diabetologia*, by involving 2796 Covid-19 patients with diabetes who were hospitalised at 68 institutions across France between March 10 and April 10, 2020, and followed for 28 days. The researchers observed that the primary outcome was tracheal intubation and/or death.

"We put together all the relevant medical information: history, usual treatment, clinical and biological presentation, and hospital prognosis," says lead

author Matthieu Wargny, MD, L'Institut du Thorax, INSERM, CNRS, University Hospital of Nantes, France.

"We were also interested in positive outcomes, like returning home or to a care home, transfer to another hospital, or follow-up care," Wargny noted. The study revealed that after 28 days, 577 patients (20.6 per cent) had died and 1404 (50.2 per cent) had been discharged. The median duration of hospital stay was 9 days.

Wargny added: "We also found that 12.2 per cent of patients were still in hospital and 16.9% had been transferred." The researchers further noted that this may vary according to the prevalence of the virus in the current situation. He added that the researchers "were able to identify the principal prognostic risk factors, both negative and positive."

Among the risk factors that led to poorer outcomes, advancing age was the most important. This was followed by a history of microvascular complications, particularly kidney and eye damage, dyspnea on admission, and inflammatory markers (white blood cell count, raised C-reactive protein, and elevated aspartate transaminase).

Among the positive risk factors, researchers identified routine treatment with metformin and a history of Covid-19 symptoms before hospitalisation. (Source: Business Line)

UK to receive 10 million AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine doses from India's Serum Institute



The UK will receive 10 million AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine doses made by the Serum Institute of India (SII), the UK government said in a statement on Tuesday.

SII, the world's largest vaccine manufacturer by volume, is mass producing the AstraZeneca vaccine, developed with Oxford University, for dozens of poor and middle-income countries.

"The UK has ordered 100 million doses of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine, of which 10 million doses will come from the Serum Institute of India," a UK government spokesperson told Reuters.

Reuters reported in February that Britain's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) was auditing the manufacturing processes at SII to pave the way for the AstraZeneca vaccine to be shipped from there to the UK.

The move is likely to stir concerns that wealthy Western countries are procuring vaccine doses at the expense of poor countries. A slew of low-and middle-income countries ranging from Bangladesh to Brazil are dependent on SII's AstraZeneca vaccine, branded COVISHIELD, but demand has been growing from Western countries.

It is also providing doses to the COVAX programme backed by the World Health Organization and GAVI vaccine alliance.

The UK government said the agreement follows assurances from the SII that providing doses to the UK would not impact its commitment to provide vaccines to poorer countries. Britain has been ahead at inoculating people, with nearly 20.5 million residents receiving the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine so far, according to official data.

Separately, the European Union's drug regulator is auditing the manufacturing site of SII, Reuters reported on Monday. AstraZeneca has committed to delivering 180 million doses in the second quarter to the EU. (Source: Reuters)