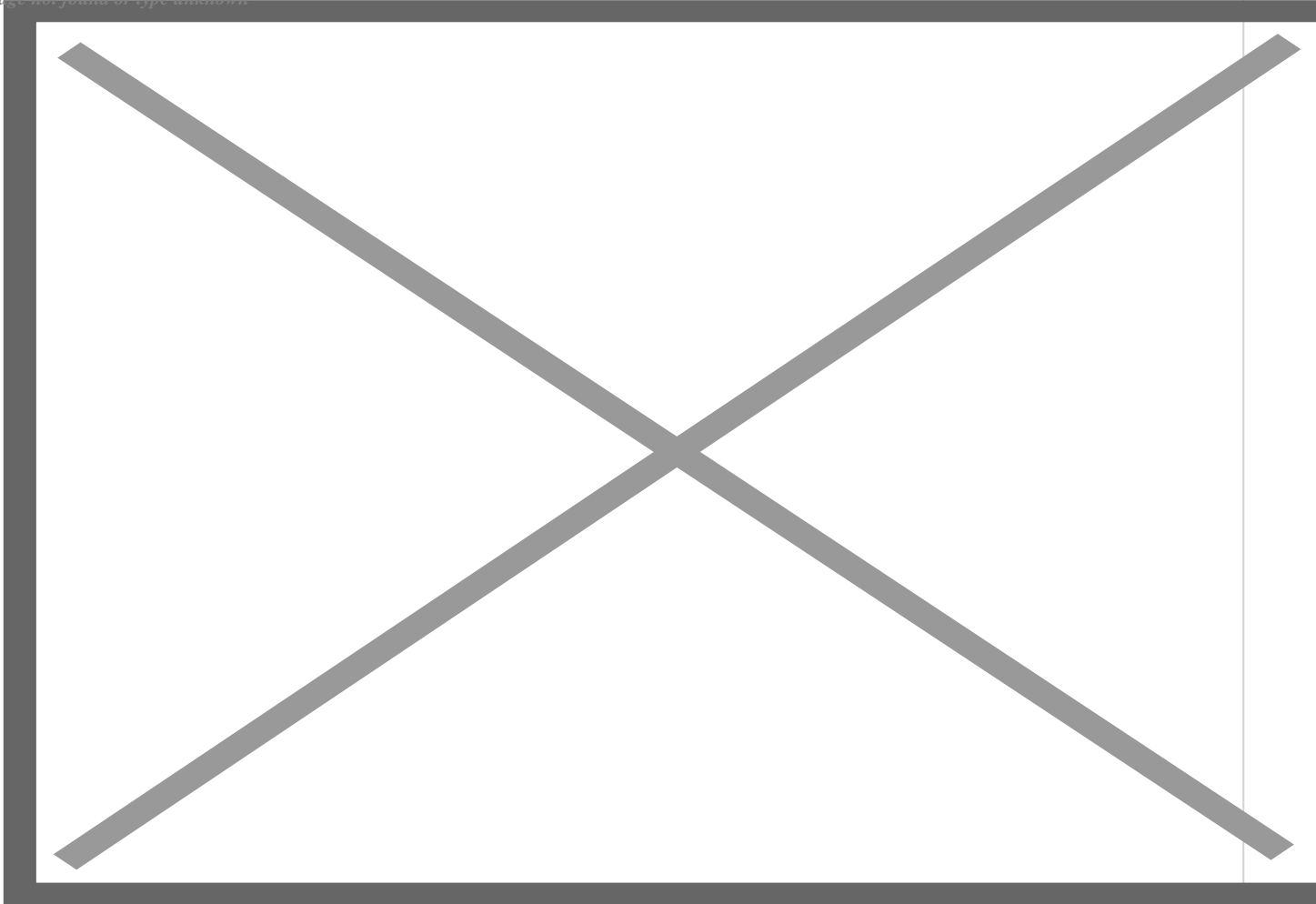


UK reaches 15 million COVID jab milestone

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson hails hitting 'significant' occasion. (Photo: AFP)

London, February 15 (RHC)-- The United Kingdom's government says it has met a target of offering at least a first coronavirus vaccine shot to the most vulnerable people in England by mid-February, reaching some 15 million people in four priority groups.

The vaccine programme is seen as one of few successes in the government's handling of a pandemic that has left the country of about 67 million people with a higher death toll and worse economic damage than many others.

After becoming the first in the world to approve a vaccine, the British government set an ambitious February 15 target date to reach 15 million care home residents and staff, front-line health and care workers, all those aged 70 or above and the clinically extremely vulnerable.

“Today we have reached a significant milestone,” Prime Minister Boris Johnson said in a video message posted on social media on Sunday. “No one is resting on their laurels ... We’ve still got a long way to go and there will undoubtedly be bumps in the road, but after all we’ve achieved, I know we can go forward with great confidence.”

Johnson said all the four priority groups had been reached in England but he did not speak for Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, and did not say the overall target had been met. In some areas, those in lower priority groups have received jabs. He will set out further progress on Monday.

The country will now start administering vaccines from Monday to those aged between 65 and 69 and those clinically vulnerable to COVID-19, with almost 1.2 million already invited to book their jabs, the state-run National Health Service (NHS) said. Ministers have also pledged to vaccinate all above-50s by May and all adults by September.

Infection rates have dropped markedly across the country over recent weeks, as strict lockdown measures have curbed previously spiralling case numbers, hospitalisations and deaths. The improving situation has prompted calls for stringent lockdown restrictions to be lifted in early March, despite concern about the spread of virus variants that may be more resistant to vaccines.

A new 10-day hotel quarantine regime for British residents returning from 33 virus variant hotspots begins on Monday, despite criticism that the move is too little, too late. Johnson said on Saturday he is “optimistic” he will be able to set out plans for a “cautious” easing of the stay-at-home rules in England later this month.

He has promised to review all relevant data next week, before setting out the government’s “road map” for the months ahead on February 22. But he is facing pressure from some of the government’s own lawmakers.

Lockdown-sceptic Conservatives have called on Johnson to commit to a timetable for completely ending the controls by May. In a letter to the British premier, the leaders of the COVID Recovery Group of Conservative MPs said the “tremendous pace” of the vaccination roll-out allowed for the move.

“The vaccine gives us immunity from Covid, but it must also give us permanent immunity from Covid-related lockdowns and restrictions,” they wrote. “All restrictions remaining after March 8 should be proportionate to the ever-increasing number of people we have protected.”

But Foreign Minister Dominic Raab said it was too soon yet to discuss when restrictions could be lifted. “We share all of the ambition and the desire to get out of this lockdown, we want to do it responsibly and safely and therefore it’s got to be based on the evidence,” he told Times Radio.

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