# COVID-19 vaccines enter Gaza after Israel hold up
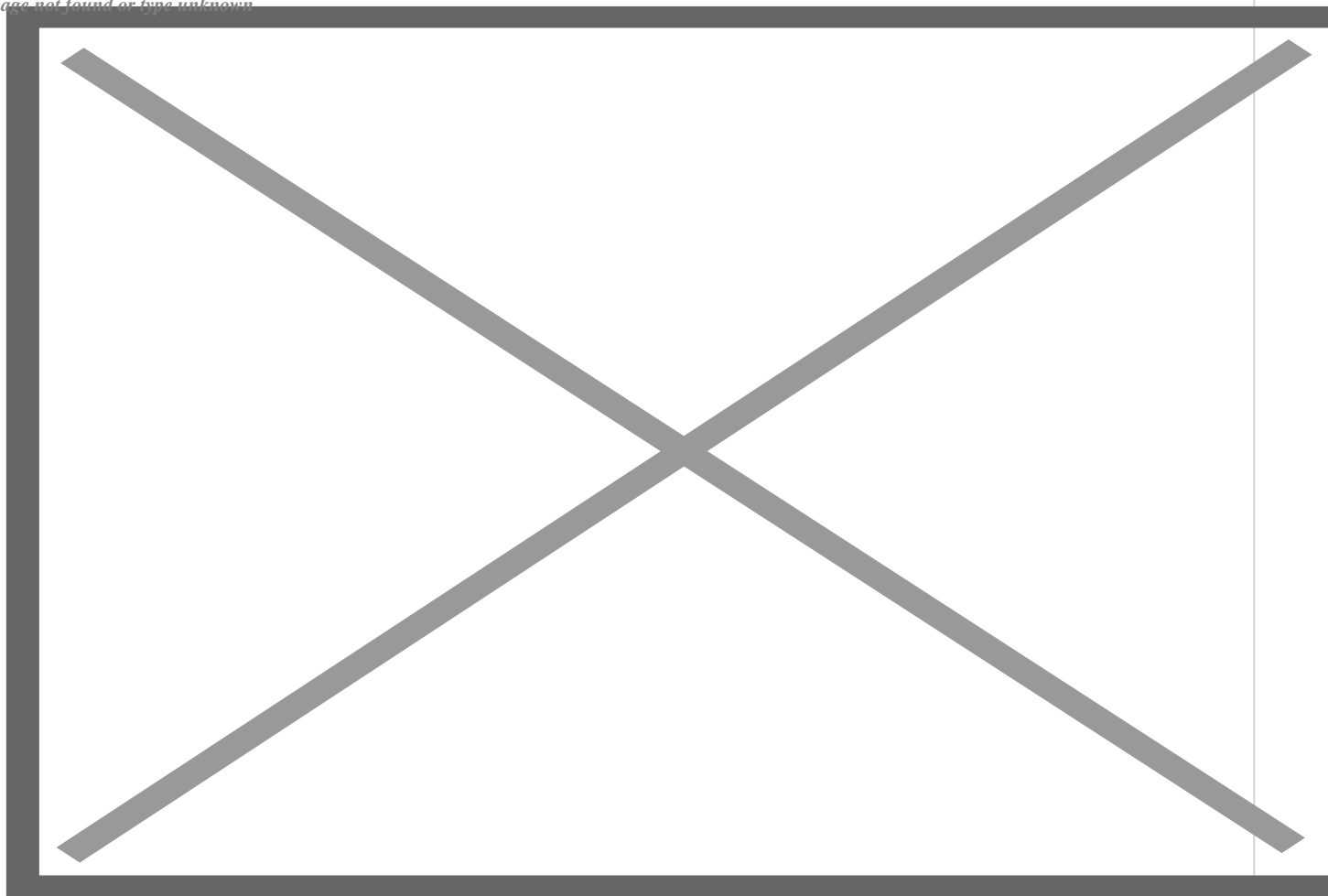


**Workers in protective gear spray disinfectant as a precaution against the coronavirus at the main market in Gaza City.  (Photo: Adel Hana/AP Photo)**

Gaza City, February 18 (RHC)-- A shipment of 2,000 coronavirus vaccine doses donated by Russia entered the besieged Gaza Strip on Wednesday after Israel blocked it earlier this week.   Palestinian and Israeli officials said the shipment, sent by the Palestinian Authority (PA) from the occupied West Bank, included doses of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, enough to inoculate 1,000 people in a two-shot regimen.

"We will use the doses to vaccinate patients who had organ transplants and those who suffer kidney failure," Majdi Dhair, a Gaza health ministry official, told Reuters news agency. "Medical personnel will not be vaccinated this time as the shipment is not enough," Dhair said.

Shipment of the vaccine, via Israel, to Gaza had drawn criticism from right-wing Israeli politicians who called on the government to make the transfer conditional on the release of two Israeli civilians believed to be held captive in Gaza and the return of the remains of two Israeli soldiers killed in the 2014 assault on Gaza by Israel.

But Israel, leading the world in the speed of its own vaccination programme, has also come under pressure from rights groups to do more to ensure vaccines reach Palestinians in territory it captured in the 1967 war.

Israel's defence ministry confirmed the shipment had departed to the coastal enclave, AFP news agency reported. COGAT, the Israeli military body that runs civilian affairs in the occupied Palestinian territories, said the Sputnik V doses were being "transferred from the Palestinian Authority" in the occupied West Bank to Gaza following a delay to get Israeli political approval.

The delay highlights the challenges Palestinians face in inoculating citizens across the West Bank and Gaza – two geographically divided areas home to 5.2 million Palestinians. Israel controls all entry and exit points to the West Bank and most of the coastal and land boundaries of the Gaza Strip, an enclave that Israeli troops and settlers left in 2005.

The PA has said it will share its vaccine supply with Gaza, where Hamas has been in power since a violent power struggle in 2007. This is the first time that the enclave, which is home to more than two million Palestinians, receives vaccines.

Authorities there have reported more than 53,000 infections and at least 537 deaths since the start of the pandemic.

Gaza has been under siege by both Israel and Egypt for more than a decade, during which time Israel launched three military assaults on the Strip, devastating much of coastal enclave's infrastructure, including its healthcare facilities.

The PA began vaccinating front-line healthcare workers earlier this month with an initial procurement of 10,000 doses of the Sputnik V vaccine from Russia, as well as several thousand doses of the Moderna product via Israel.

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