

World Bank says Palestinian vaccine drive faces funding shortfall



A Palestinian medical worker collects a swab sample from a boy to be tested for COVID in the southern Gaza Strip. (Photo: Ibraheem Abu Mustafa/Reuters)

Washington, February 23 (RHC)-- The Palestinians' COVID-19 vaccination plan faces a \$30 million-funding shortfall, even after factoring in support from a global vaccine scheme for poorer economies, the World Bank said in a report on Monday.

Israel, a world leader in terms of vaccination speed, should consider donating surplus doses to the Palestinians to help accelerate a vaccine roll-out in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, the bank said.

"In order to ensure there is an effective vaccination campaign, Palestinian and Israeli authorities should coordinate in the financing, purchase and distribution of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines," according to the World Bank.

The Palestinian Authority (PA) plans to cover 20 percent of Palestinians through the COVAX vaccine-sharing program. PA officials hope to procure additional vaccines to achieve 60 percent coverage. Cost estimates suggest that "a total of about \$55 million would be needed to cover 60 percent of the population, of which there is an existing gap of \$30 million," the World Bank said, calling for additional donor help.

The Palestinians began vaccinations this month and have received small donations from Israel, Russia and the United Arab Emirates. But the roughly 32,000 doses received to date fall far short of the 5.2 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, territory Israel captured in a 1967 war.

Israeli officials have said that under the Oslo peace accords, the PA health ministry is responsible for vaccinating people in Gaza and parts of the West Bank where it has limited self-rule.

Israel reopened swathes of its economy on Sunday after rolling out one of the world's swiftest vaccination programs. It has been giving Pfizer-BioNTech's vaccine to its 9.1 million citizens and has a separate stockpile of an estimated 100,000 doses of Moderna's vaccine.

While the PA expects to receive an initial COVAX shipment within weeks, the programme is at risk of failing, mainly due to a lack of funds. The PA says it has supply deals with Russia and drugmaker AstraZeneca but doses have been slow to arrive. "From a humanitarian perspective, Israel can consider donating the extra doses it has ordered that it would not be using," the World Bank said.

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