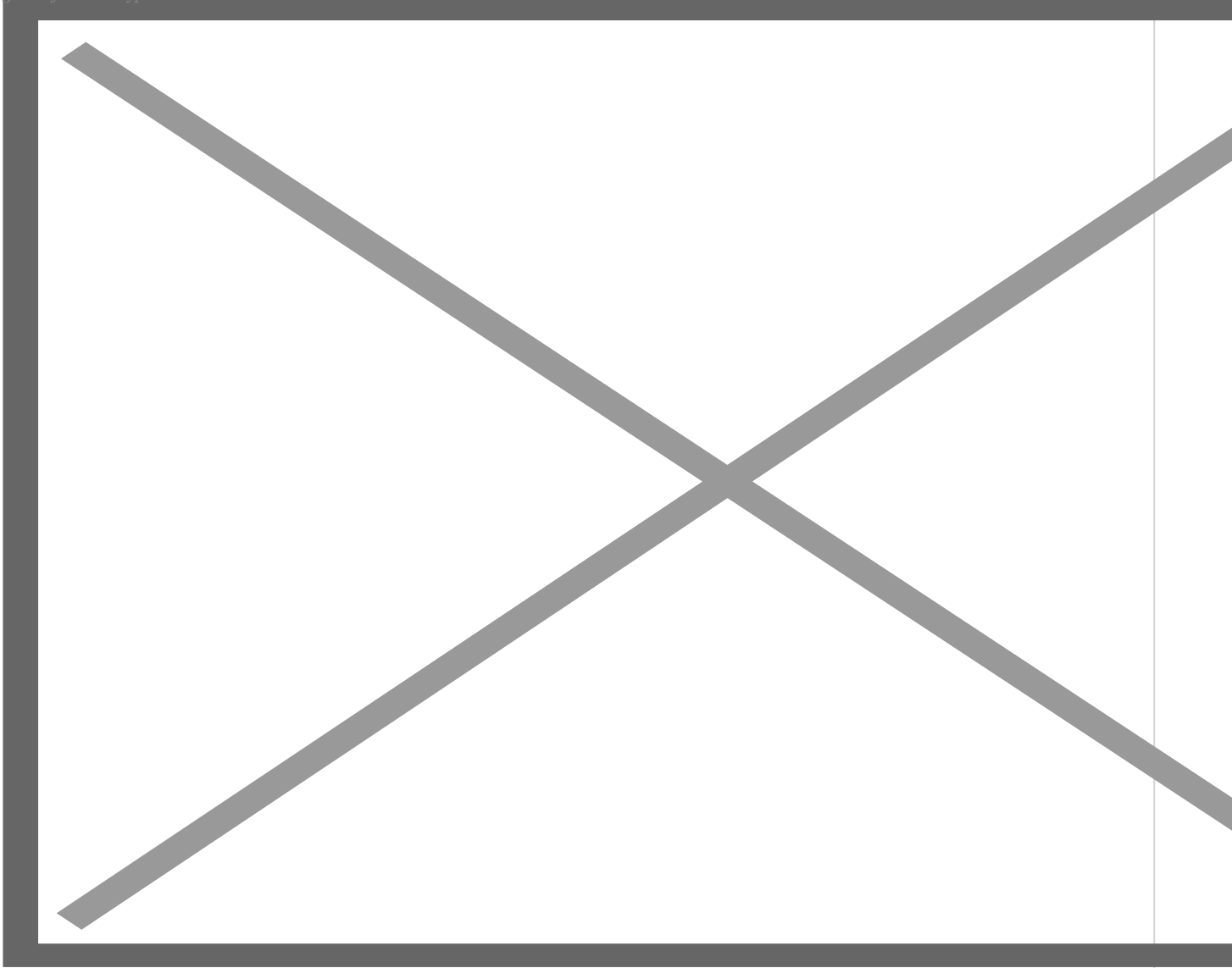


WHO ‘very concerned’ as virus numbers climb in Papua New Guinea

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Throughout all of 2020, the impoverished country of more than eight million people recorded just 900 cases, but on Thursday, its total climbed to more than 9,300 with 82 deaths [Gorethy Kenneth/AFP]

Port Moresby, April 18 (RHC)-- The World Health Organization has expressed concern about a “sharp increase” of COVID-19 cases in Papua New Guinea warning the outbreak was at a critical stage and could fuel a much larger epidemic.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom, speaking at a virtual news conference, said on Friday that although the numbers were relatively small in PNG, the outbreak’s pace was concerning. “The increase is sharp, and WHO is very concerned about the potential for a much larger epidemic,” Adhanom told media.

With 132,000 AstraZeneca vaccines arriving in the country earlier this week from the COVAX scheme, boosting the 8,000 doses already sent by Australia, there was a vital need for more to be sent to the small Pacific nation, he said. “Papa New Guinea is a perfect example of why vaccine equity is so important.”

Throughout all of 2020, the impoverished country of more than eight million people recorded just 900 cases, but on Thursday, its total climbed to more than 9,300 with 82 deaths. But there are fears the real scale of the outbreak is much larger due to low testing rates.

Papua New Guinea’s Health Minister Jelta Wong said the number of health workers infected with the virus continued to grow. Vaccination efforts have centred on front-line workers in the capital of Port Moresby, with 1,600 people so far receiving the jab.

The outbreak has pushed the nation’s health system to the limit, with hospitals turning away patients due to a lack of medical staff and a temporary field hospital set-up in a sports stadium. In response expert medical teams from Australia, the US and Germany were now working in the country to help curb the spread.

Wong again flagged vaccine disinformation as a major threat to the rollout but said he was encouraged that more people from the provinces were coming forward in recent days wanting to be vaccinated. “It’s not going to be easy but it’s something we are going to have to work towards to ensure a safer Papua New Guinea.”

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