

U.S. vaccine scandal prompts health secretary to resign

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Alex Azar, Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), with President Donald Trump in November 2020. (Photo: AFP)

Washington, January 16 (RHC)--U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar has resigned, admitting that the Donald Trump administration did not have the reserve vaccine it had promised the nation to stockpile.

U.S. media reports say that Azar resigned from his post, citing the January 6th riot on Capitol Hill as his main reason for resignation. Azar told outgoing U.S. President Donald Trump in a letter that the attack by Trump loyalists could tarnish the legacy of his administration.

In the letter, Azar, who will remain on the job until President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration on January 20th, voiced concern that last week's siege of the Capitol Hill and Trump's unfounded claims of widespread election fraud "threaten to tarnish these and other historic legacies of this administration."

"The attacks on the Capitol were an assault on our democracy and on the tradition of peaceful transitions of power," Azar wrote.

In the letter, Azar praised what he called the Trump administration's rapid development of the COVID-19 vaccine. However, he also revealed in the letter that the Trump administration did not have a second dose of the vaccines in stockpile as it had promised. Azar said that it was now up to the states to provide new vaccine doses.

"We now have enough confidence that our ongoing production will be quality and available to provide the second dose for people. So we're not sitting on a reserve anymore. We've made that available to the states to order," Azar said.

Until now, the Trump administration had communicated to states that there was a reserve stockpile of second doses of the vaccines. After Azar's letter, the governors of several states blasted the Trump administration for its deception.

They said that the Trump administration had pledged to immediately distribute millions of COVID-19 vaccine doses from a stockpile that the US health secretary has since acknowledged does not exist.

"Last night I received disturbing news ... States will not be receiving increased shipments of vaccines from the national stockpile next week, because there is no federal reserve of doses," Oregon Governor Kate Brown wrote on Twitter. "This is a deception on a national scale," Brown noted.

In related news, the Washington Post said on Friday that the Trump administration ran down its vaccine reserve in late December taking second doses for the two-dose regimen directly off the manufacturing line.

Because both of the vaccines distributed in the US were two-dose regimens, the Trump administration's initial policy was to hold back second doses to protect against manufacturing disruptions. But that approach shifted in recent weeks, according to the officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter.

Now, health officials across the U.S., who were led to believe the number of vaccines would be doubling beginning next week, were finding out that vaccine supplies will remain largely flat, dashing hopes of expanding access for millions of elderly people and those with high-risk medical conditions.

Meanwhile, the coronavirus death toll in the United States had reached almost 400,000 with more than 3,000 Americans dying of the virus daily on average. "Four hundred thousand is an astounding number of deaths," said Howard Markel, a medical historian at the University of Michigan.

"Those kinds of numbers have a mind-numbing effect on us, particularly if you weren't affected yourself," he said, "but we can't discuss this enough."

Biden has blasted the vaccine program of the Trump administration as a "dismal failure" and said more needed to be done to expand access to underserved and hard-to-reach areas. "If you were to ask most people today, they couldn't tell you who exactly is getting vaccinated," Biden, who will take the helm in four days, said.



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