

Sixteen African nations show interest in AU COVID vaccine plan

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Addis Ababa, February 5 (RHC)-- Sixteen African countries have shown interest in securing COVID-19 vaccines under an African Union (AU) plan, and allocations could be announced in the next few weeks,

according to the head of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

While many rich nations have already begun mass inoculation drives, only a few African countries have started vaccinations, and the 55-member African Union hopes to see 60 percent of the continent's 1.3 billion people immunised in the next three years.

Africa CDC Director John Nkengasong said the 16 countries had asked for a total of 114 million doses under the AU's Vaccine Acquisition Task Team (AVATT), which began work in mid-January. "Our hope is that in the next two to three weeks, they should be having their vaccines," he told a virtual news conference on Thursday.

Africa is also due to receive about 600 million vaccine doses this year via the COVAX facility, co-led by the World Health Organization (WHO). At a later briefing, WHO Africa director Matshidiso Moeti said nearly 90 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine could start arriving on the continent later this month.

"These doses would help countries reach three percent of their populations in the first half of 2021, targeting the most at-risk groups, especially front-line health workers," she said. Moeti said some 320,000 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine had been allocated to Cape Verde, Rwanda, South Africa and Tunisia, and deliveries were expected this month. The COVAX facility aims to help secure vaccines for 20 percent of Africans, which will mean about 600 million doses, Moeti said.

Nkengasong said the COVID-19 case fatality rate on the continent "is becoming very troubling" as it creeps ever higher than the global one. Nkengasong told reporters that the fatality rate on the 54-nation continent is now 2.6 percent while the global rate is 2.2 percent.

Twenty African countries including South Africa and Sudan have rates higher than the global average as a resurgence of cases in parts of the continent has a far deadlier toll than the initial wave of infections last year.

Africa's confirmed deaths in the pandemic are approaching 100,000, with more than 3.6 million cases overall. Nkengasong said "it would be a tragedy if we begin to normalise these deaths."

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