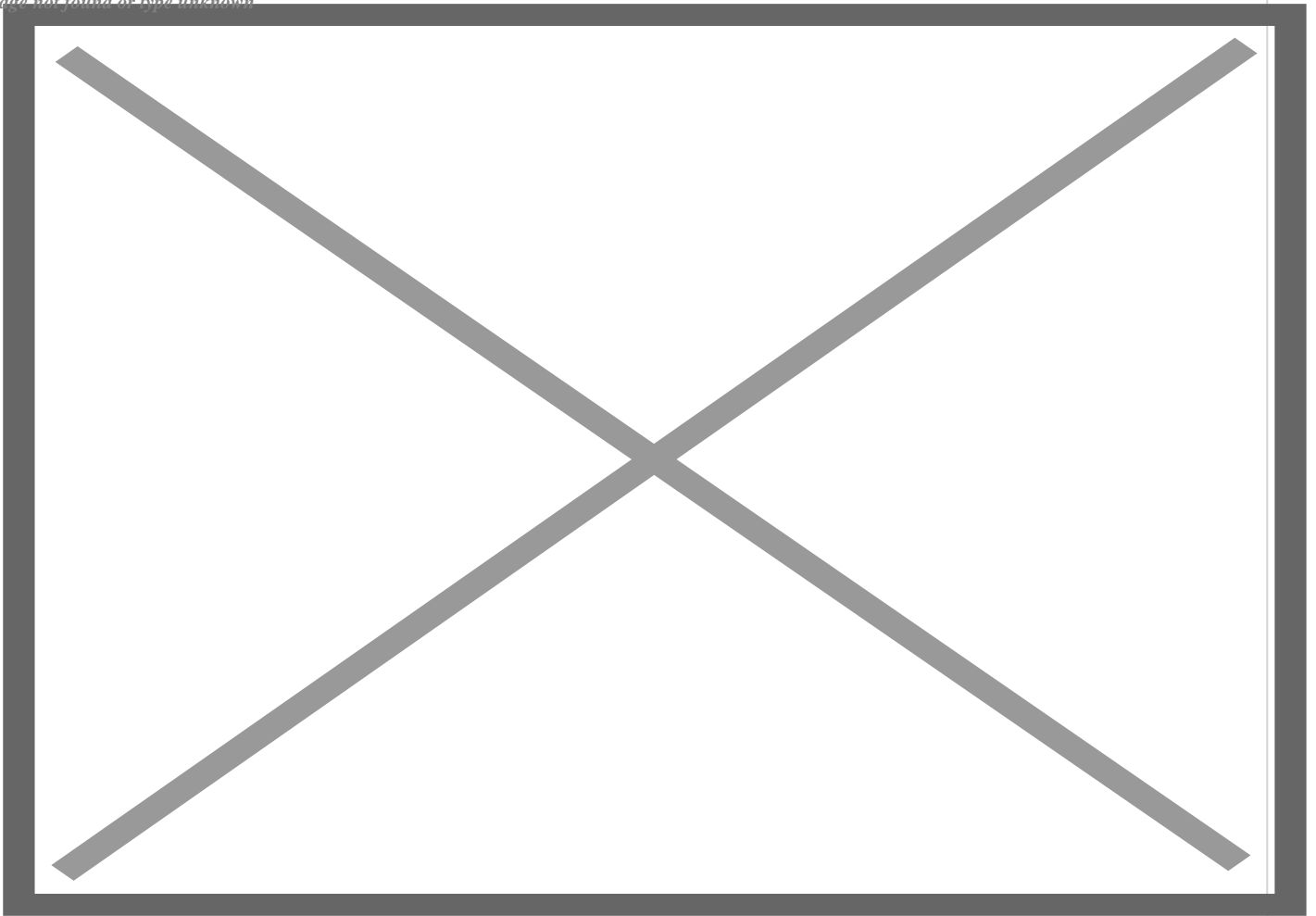


Peru's foreign minister resigns over COVID vaccine scandal

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Elizabeth Astete resigned amid a political scandal in Peru. (Photo: Luis Iparraguirre/Peruvian Presidency/AFP)

Lima, February 16 (RHC)-- Peru's foreign minister has resigned, the second top official to step down amid a growing scandal over politicians receiving COVID-19 vaccinations well before the general public.

Elizabeth Astete tweeted that she had been vaccinated last month, calling it a "serious mistake" and saying she would not get a second dose.

Health Minister Pilar Mazzetti also stepped down last week following a newspaper report that ex-President Martin Vizcarra had received a shot of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine in October. Peruvian media said that Attorney General Zoraida Avalos had opened a “preliminary investigation” against Vizcarra and others responsible for the early vaccination of senior officials.

Public resentment over officials receiving vaccinations – despite there being no date for a wider immunisation drive – has grown. The government has said it intends to inoculate 10 million people by July.

The Latin American nation has been badly hit by the pandemic, with its hospitals overwhelmed and a targeted vaccination programme for health workers rolling out only from February 8 after it received 300,000 doses of the vaccine.

Vizcarra, 57, received the jab just weeks before being impeached and removed from office on charges he was “morally incompetent.” The ex-president – who is now campaigning for a seat in Congress – admitted last week he and his wife had taken part in a vaccine trial, adding he had kept quiet about it as “volunteers have to maintain confidentiality.”

Lima’s Cayetano Heredia University, which is leading clinical tests of the Sinopharm vaccine, on Sunday denied Vizcarra had been a trial volunteer. Vizcarra expressed “great surprise” at the university’s statement, reiterating he had received two doses as a trial subject.

He insisted there had been no “administrative fault or crime”, and warned his actions were being exploited by “enemies of the country.”

The scandal has sparked outrage in the nation of 33 million, currently facing a second wave of the virus that has seen cases quadruple. “It is not possible that in the midst of a crisis public office is used for personal gain. Investigation and punishment of those responsible is urgently needed,” President of the Peruvian Congress Mirtha Vasquez told America TV.

Peruvian media has speculated there may be numerous officials who are already vaccinated, prompting Peru’s interim President Francisco Sagasti’s chief of staff and 12 other ministers to state they have yet to be immunised.

Peru has recorded more than 1.2 million coronavirus cases and more than 43,700 deaths.

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