

Zimbabwe receives first batch of Sinopharm vaccines

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Constantino Chiwenga (left), Zimbabwe's vice president and health minister, walks with Guo Shaochun (right), the Chinese ambassador. (Photo: Jekesai Njikizana/AFP)

Harare, February 16 (RHC)-- Zimbabwe has received its first 200,000 coronavirus vaccines, a donation by the Chinese government. Vice President and Health Minister Constantino Chiwenga was at the Robert Mugabe International Airport in the capital, Harare, in the early hours of Monday for the arrival of the doses of the Sinopharm vaccine from China.

“It has not been lost on us that in times of need China’s response has been swift,” he said, describing China’s donation as “yet another demonstration of the long bond of friendship and solidarity.” The donation is one of China’s first shipments of vaccines to Africa, after deliveries to Egypt and Equatorial Guinea. President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s government has purchased an additional 600,000 Sinopharm vaccine doses that are expected to arrive early next month, according to state media.

The first doses will undergo routine checks by the local medicines control authority before being administered this week. Health professionals and immigration agents working at border posts will get first priority for the jabs, according to a government roll-out plan.

China’s Ambassador to Zimbabwe Guo Shaochun said Zimbabwe was one of the first of 58 countries to receive donations of the Sinopharm vaccine. “Zimbabwe is our brother so the supply of vaccines to Zimbabwe is not a problem,” he said.

The Chinese-made jabs are just the start of the millions needed for Zimbabwe to vaccinate 10 million people, representing 60 percent of the country’s population. Zimbabwe “has also submitted its expression of interest” to be part of an initiative by the African Union to buy vaccines in bulk for the continent, Information Minister Monica Mutsvangwa said last week.

The government of the cash-strapped country says it has budgeted \$100 million for vaccines and local businesses have also been asked to donate to the effort. In all, Zimbabwe plans to procure a total of 1.8 million doses of the Sinopharm formula – which is 79 percent effective, according to its developers.

“Next month we will be acquiring additional vaccines from China to the tune of 600,000 doses and the programme will continue until we head towards the target of 1.8 million doses,” said Finance Minister Mthuli Ncube at the airport.

If Zimbabwe begins immunisations next week, it will be the first in the southern African region to do so. Its better-off neighbour South Africa, an economic powerhouse, is yet to begin inoculation after putting its own campaign on hold.

South Africa halted the start of immunisations over concerns about the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine’s efficacy against a variant of the coronavirus that is dominant in the country. It had received a million doses of the jab. The efficacy of China’s Sinopharm against the new variant is still unclear.

As of Sunday, Zimbabwe had recorded 35,172 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 1,400 related deaths.

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