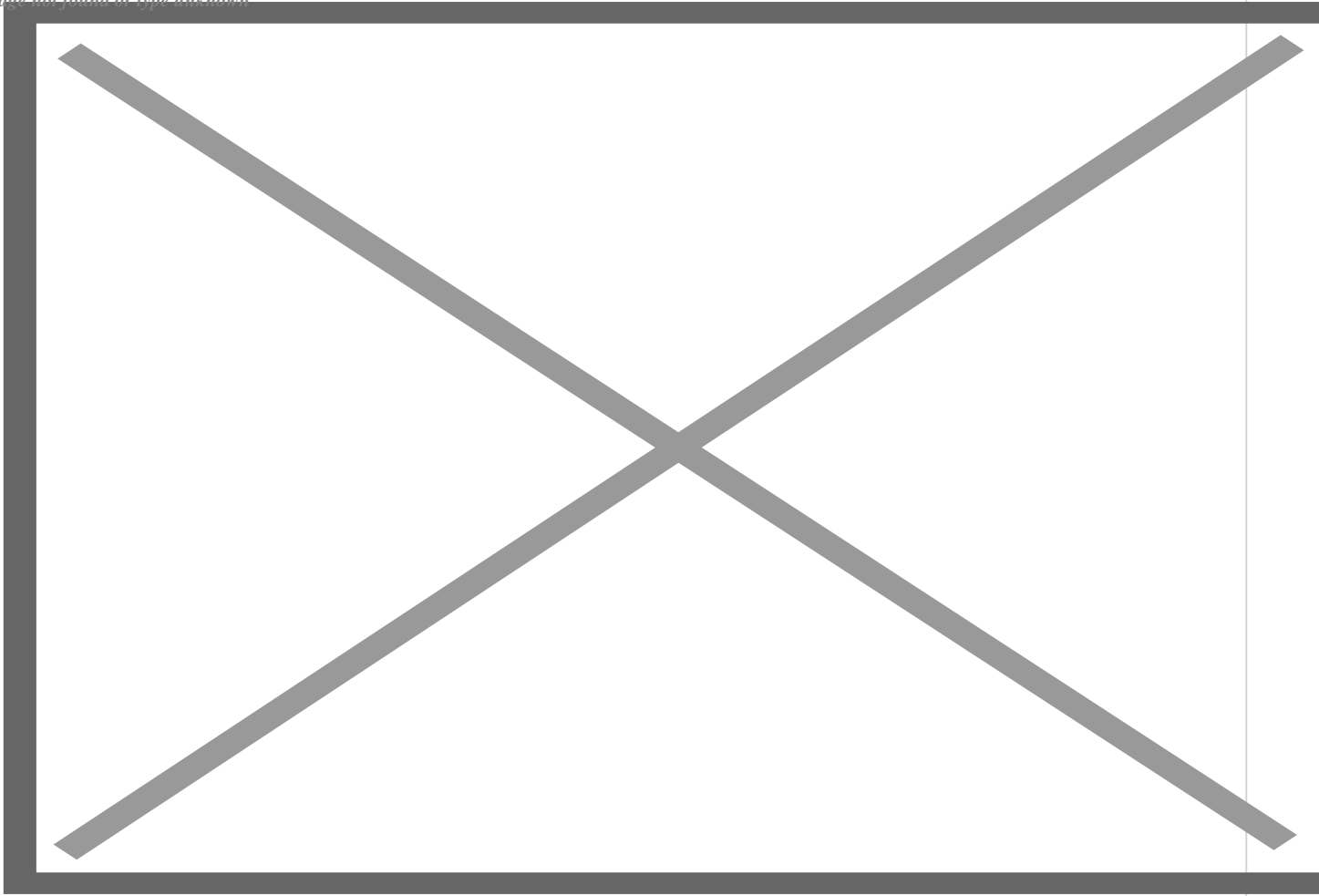


Peru's ex-president sought COVID jab out of turn

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A newsstand in Lima displays newspapers highlighting an early vaccination scandal involving politicians and top officials. (Photo: Ernesto Benavides/AFP)

Lima, February 18 (RHC)-- The doctor leading a coronavirus vaccine trial in Peru has said former President Martin Vizcarra got a COVID-19 jab out of turn, as a scandal over government officials receiving vaccines before the general public continues to roil the South American nation.

Dr German Malaga testified in parliament on Tuesday that Vizcarra, who previously said he had been inoculated as a clinical trial volunteer, was not, in fact, a volunteer. "He asked me for two vaccines,"

Malaga, of the Cayetano Heredia University in Lima running the trial, told a virtual session of a congressional commission. Vizcarra's wife also received a shot.

Malaga said Vizcarra had approached him about being vaccinated on October 1, when the drug was being rolled out to 12,000 trial volunteers. Vizcarra knew he would be getting the real vaccine from Chinese company Sinopharm, the doctor added.

The scandal over government officials receiving COVID-19 jabs months before Peru officially began its vaccination campaign has led to the resignations of the country's health and foreign affairs ministers, as well as two vice ministers involved in fighting the virus. Vizcarra had earlier confirmed that he and two family members were vaccinated before Congress removed him in November over a corruption allegation.

Foreign Minister Elizabeth Astete said in her letter of resignation that she secretly received the jab in late January. "I could not allow myself the luxury of falling ill," she wrote. That infuriated many Peruvians.

"They took advantage of their positions. It confirms that the priority wasn't for colleagues in the intensive care units who faced death 24 hours straight without even breaks for food," Godofredo Talavera, the president of the Peruvian medical federation, told the Associated Press news agency.

"We understand (now) why they waited so long in buying the vaccines. There was no rush; they'd been vaccinated," he said.

Peru has reported more than 1.2 million cases of COVID-19 and more than 43,800 coronavirus-related deaths to date, according to Johns Hopkins University – and it is battling a surging second wave. The country only officially launched its COVID-19 vaccination programme this month after it received 300,000 initial doses of the Sinopharm vaccine. The first priority for jabs goes to healthcare workers.

Interim President Francisco Sagasti said on Monday that 487 officials, including the former ministers who stepped down, took advantage of their posts to secretly receive early inoculations. Sagasti said the officials' names were being turned over to prosecutors.

"These people who were part of our government failed to do their duty as public servants," he said in a television broadcast. He added he was furious at the attitude of "many public officials who took advantage of their position" and said anyone involved "in these totally improper and inappropriate acts will not have a place in my government."

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