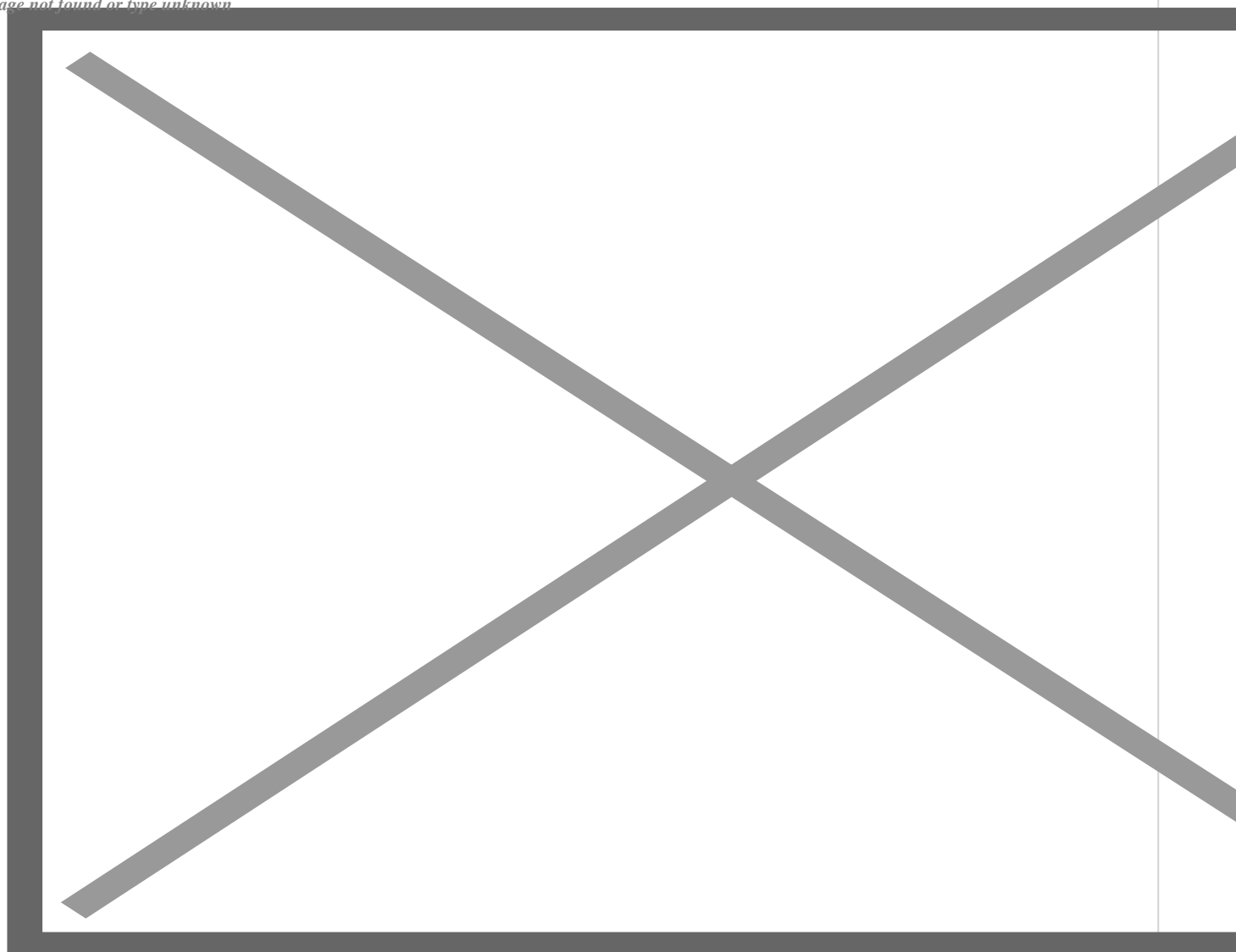


Gaza begins inoculation drive amid vaccine shortage

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A health worker prepares to vaccinate former Palestinian Health Minister Jawad Tibi against COVID-19 in Gaza City. (Photo: Mohammed Salem/Reuters)

Gaza City, February 23 (RHC)-- The inoculation campaign against COVID-19 in the besieged Gaza Strip has kicked off after the arrival of vaccines donated by Russia and the United Arab Emirates. On Monday,

officials and health workers received the first shots of 22,000 Russian Sputnik V jabs in front of dozens of cameras.

Medhat Mahisen, a Ministry of Health representative, said the vaccination roll-out's first targets are going to be healthcare workers dealing with COVID-19 patients. He also urged residents to register online for the vaccination, according to a statement on the Ministry of Health's website.

"I am proud the health sector was able to overcome this difficult time, with limited resources but great dedication," said Riyad Zanoun, a former Gaza health minister, after receiving his first dose.

Two other former health ministers, Jawad al-Tibi and Bassem Naeem, were also inoculated in the blockaded coastal area that is controlled by the Palestinian group Hamas.

Gaza health authorities have reported nearly 54,400 cases and 543 deaths, including 128 new infections in the past 24 hours.

Gaza has been under an Israeli-Egyptian blockade since Hamas seized control of the area in 2007 from its rival, Fatah. The number of vaccines received is a very small fraction of what is needed to immunise the Strip, home to two million people including some 1.4 million adults.

The occupied West Bank is also struggling with vaccine shortage. The Palestinian Authority (PA) started a vaccination campaign on February 2nd after receiving 2,000 doses from Israel, in addition to 10,000 doses from Russia – 2,000 were transferred last week to Gaza following Israel's approval.

The PA plans to cover 20 percent of Palestinians through the COVAX vaccine-sharing program.

However, the international platform has not started yet to distribute vaccines and it has struggled so far to secure doses.

Palestinians' limited vaccine roll-out stands in stark contrast to Israel, which is on pace to immunise almost all of its adult population in the coming weeks with the two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. Palestinians citizens of Israel are among those vaccinated.

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