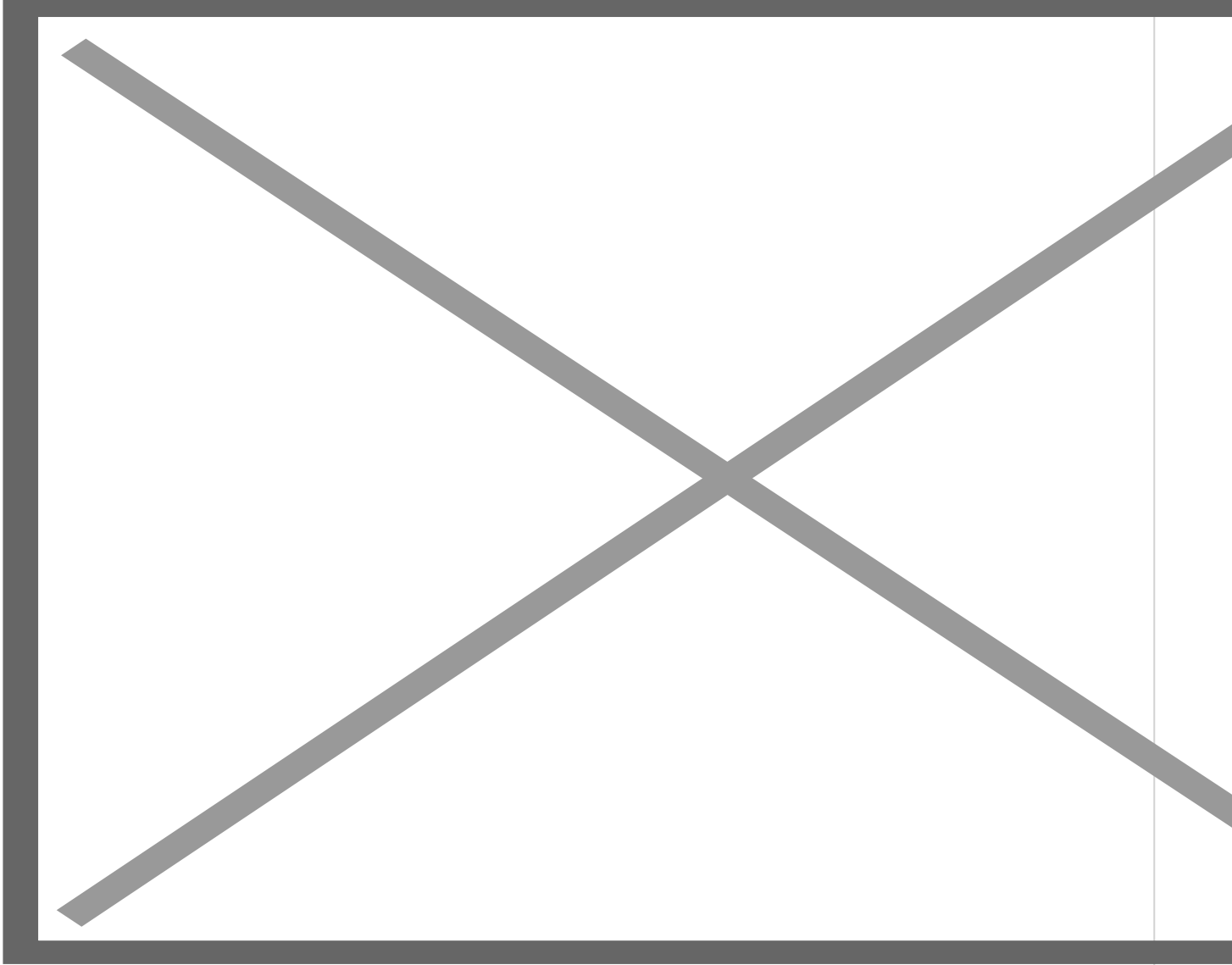


Palestinian Authority receives COVID-19 vaccines from global COVAX

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A Palestinian health worker is vaccinated against the coronavirus disease after the delivery of doses from Israel to Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank [Photo: Mussa Qawasma/Reuters]

Ramallah, March 18 (RHC)-- The Palestinian Authority (PA) on Wednesday received the first batch of COVID-19 vaccines from the global COVAX sharing initiative, in a boost to inoculations in the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip which lag far behind Israel's campaign.

A Palestinian health ministry spokesman said 38,000 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine would be used for inoculations as of Sunday, while 24,000 doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine would be stored "until there is a scientific decision from the World Health Organization."

The WHO, one of the leaders of the COVAX program, has said its advisory panel was reviewing reports from several countries of isolated cases of bleeding, blood clots and low platelet counts after administration of the AstraZeneca shots.

But the organisation appealed to nations on Monday not to pause vaccination campaigns over the safety fears. The vaccines shipped to Tel Aviv were the first sent by the WHO to the Palestinians under the COVAX drive it set up with the GAVI vaccine alliance to ensure equitable access to COVID-19 vaccinations globally. Further COVAX shipments are expected in a few months.

A truck brought the initial shipment from Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport to the Palestinian city of Ramallah in the occupied West Bank. About one-third of the doses have been allocated for the Gaza Strip.

An official in the office of the UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process said the vaccines "will be critical tools in our fight against the pandemic and for socioeconomic recovery".

The Palestinian Authority hopes to cover about 20 percent of the Palestinian population through the COVAX initiative. It said the initial doses from COVAX would be given to health workers, cancer and kidney patients and people over the age of 75.

Palestinian authorities have come under fire recently following an outcry over its distribution scheme, amid accusations that VIPs and ministers have been given priority. Several Palestinian human rights and civil society groups have urged an investigation into the PA's vaccination programme, saying it was not transparent.

The occupied West Bank, where 3.1 million Palestinians live, has reported 146,359 coronavirus cases, with 1,667 deaths. The Gaza Strip, with a population of two million, has registered more than 57,891 cases with 572 deaths.

Health officials in Gaza said some 8,500 people had received the first dose of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. In the occupied West Bank, about 5,000 have had their first shot.

About 90,000 of the 120,000 Palestinian labourers who have Israeli work permits have been vaccinated by Israel, which has been a world leader in its vaccination rollout.

Israeli officials have said that under the Oslo peace accords, the PA health ministry is responsible for vaccinating Palestinians. Critics, however, have accused Israel of "vaccine apartheid", saying that as an occupying power, it is responsible for inoculating the Palestinian population that is under its economic and political control.



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