

S. Africa to start Africa's first coronavirus vaccine pilot

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South Africa will roll out the continent's first coronavirus vaccine trial this week, the university leading the pilot said Tuesday, as the country grapples with the highest number of cases in Africa.

The vaccine, developed by the Oxford Jenner Institute, is already being evaluated in Britain, where 4,000 participants have signed up for the trial.

South Africa has set out to vaccinate 2,000 people with the vaccine known as ChAdOx1 nCoV-19. Fifty of the candidates have HIV.

"We began screening participants for the South African Oxford 1 COVID-19 vaccine trial last week, and the first participants will be vaccinated this week," University of Witwatersrand (Wits) vaccinology professor Shabir Madhi told a virtual press conference.

Brazil is planning its own pilot, while the United States is preparing to test another vaccine in a mass trial of up to 30,000 participants.

Wits is collaborating with the University of Oxford and the Oxford Jenner Institute on the South African trial.

South Africa's coronavirus cases jumped to more than 100,000 on Monday, while the number of deaths inched towards 2,000.

Officials implemented a strict nationwide lockdown on March 27, just weeks after the virus first hit South Africa.

But confinement measures are being gradually phased out to allow business to pick up and limit damage to an already ailing economy.

"As we enter winter in South Africa and pressure increases on public hospitals, now more than ever we need a vaccine to prevent infection by COVID-19," Madhi said, describing the vaccine trial as a "landmark moment".

Health Minister Zweli Mkhize echoed Madhi's concerns, warning that

South Africa was going through a "devastating storm" expected to peak "during the cold winter months".

New field hospital

At the opening of a field hospital in the Eastern Cape province, Mkhize said there were now more than 27,000 beds for COVID-19 patients and over 400 quarantine sites across the country.

"Our scientific estimation is that 60 to 70 percent of our population may be infected by coronavirus," the minister said at the launch on Tuesday, adding that hospitalisation rates remained lower than anticipated.

The new field hospital is being built in collaboration with the German development agency and carmaker Volkswagen—the largest German investment in South Africa.

The first phase of this temporary facility was set up a disused VW plant in the southern city of Port Elizabeth, which can now accommodate 1,485 patients.

"We have managed in just seven weeks to convert a factory... into a facility for COVID-19 patients," German Development Minister Gerd Muller said in a statement.

"We are thus able to provide 3,300 additional hospital beds including 800 with oxygenation."

Mkhize applauded the public-private collaboration, as well as healthcare workers "battling the virus".

Over 3,500 doctors and nurses have contracted COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, and at least 34 have succumbed to the respiratory

disease.

While South Africa prepares for its coronavirus vaccination trial, health officials have also pegged high hopes on dexamethasone, a generic anti-inflammatory drug found to reduce mortality among ventilated patients.

"We are especially at an advantage as we are a country that is very familiar with dexamethasone," Mkhize said, noting that three South African companies supplied the steroid.

"I must stress that dexamethasone does not mean you can abandon the basic behavioural rules for COVID-19," he added.

"You still have to wear masks, wash your hands and keep a social distance."

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