Dutch begin COVID-19 vaccinations; last EU nation to do so

January 6 2021, by Mike Corder

Healthcare worker Sanna Elkadiri, left, was the first Dutch recipient of a shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine at a mass vaccination center in Veghel, Netherlands, Wednesday Jan. 6, 2021. Nearly two weeks after most other European Union nations, the Netherlands on Wednesday began its COVID-19 vaccination program, with care home staff and frontline workers in hospitals first in line for the shot. (Piroschka van de Wouw/Pool via AP)

Nearly two weeks after most other European Union nations, the Netherlands on Wednesday began its COVID-19 vaccination program, with nursing home staff and front-line workers in hospitals first in line for the shot.

Sanna Elkadiri, a nurse at a nursing home for people with dementia, was the first to receive a shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine at a mass vaccination center in Veghel, 120 kilometers (75 miles) southeast of the capital, Amsterdam.

"This is a very important moment for me as a person who works in the care sector. You want to provide the care knowing that your clients are safe," Elkadiri said. "Without the vaccine that is not possible, but from now on I can do it."

The Dutch government has come under fierce criticism for its late start to vaccinations. Prime Minister Mark Rutte told lawmakers in a debate Tuesday that authorities had focused preparations on the easy-to-handle vaccine made by Oxford University and AstraZeneca, which hasn't yet been cleared for use in the EU, and not the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

Dutch Health Minister Hugo de Jonge didn't comment on the criticism as he spoke before Elkadiri rolled up the left sleeve of her purple nurse's uniform to receive the first shot. Instead, he looked forward to a future with the virus under control.

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"Finally, after 10 months of crisis, today we are starting to end this crisis," De Jonge said. But he warned that, "it will take a while before we have all the misery behind us. "

The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which requires ultra-cold storage before it's used, is the only shot that has been approved so far by the European Medicines Agency. On Wednesday, the agency was considering

approving another coronavirus vaccine, one made by Moderna.

"I'm very disappointed that we are two weeks behind other countries," Rutte said in the Dutch parliament.

The country's public health institute said that about 300,000 carers and hospital staff are first in line for shots. Two more large-scale vaccination centers are due to open Friday and by the end of next week, 25 should be open across the country, the institute said.

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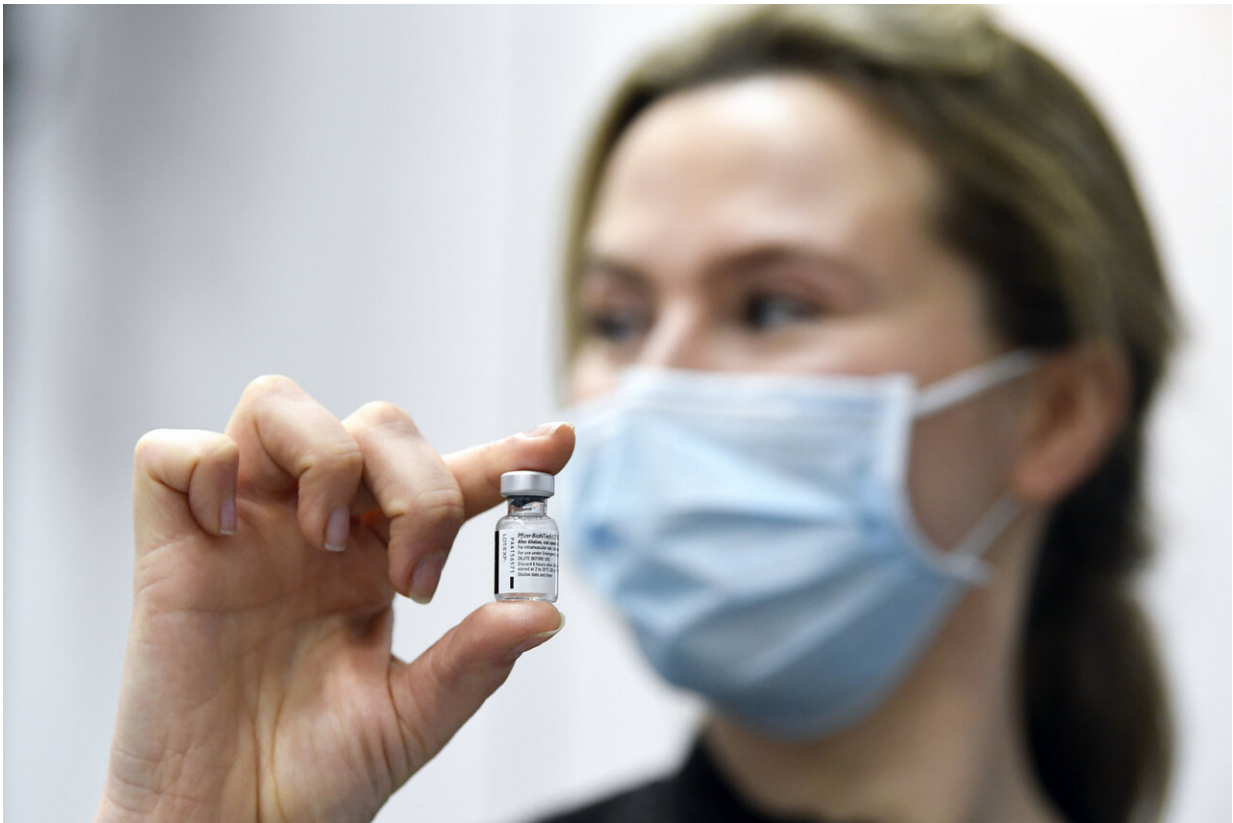
A healthcare worker, left, is administered a shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine at a mass vaccination center in Veghel, Netherlands, Wednesday Jan. 6, 2021. Nearly two weeks after most other European Union nations, the Netherlands on Wednesday began its COVID-19 vaccination program, with care home staff and frontline workers in hospitals first in line for the shot. (Piroschka van de Wouw/Pool via AP)

Netherland's Health Minister Hugo De Jonge speaks before the first shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine is administered at a mass vaccination center in Veghel, Netherlands, Wednesday Jan. 6, 2021. Nearly two weeks after most other European Union nations, the Netherlands on Wednesday began its COVID-19 vaccination program, with care home staff and frontline workers in hospitals first in line for the shot. (Piroschka van de Wouw/Pool via AP)

Netherland's Health Minister Hugo De Jonge looks on as a healthcare worker receives the first shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine at a mass vaccination center in Veghel, Netherlands, Wednesday Jan. 6, 2021. Nearly two weeks after most other European Union nations, the Netherlands on Wednesday began its COVID-19 vaccination program, with care home staff and frontline workers in hospitals first in line for the shot. (Piroschka van de Wouw/Pool via AP)

A woman holds the empty container of the first used Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccine used in The Netherlands at a mass vaccination center in Veghel, Wednesday Jan. 6, 2021. Nearly two weeks after most other European Union nations, the Netherlands on Wednesday began its COVID-19 vaccination program, with care home staff and frontline workers in hospitals first in line for

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Health authorities plan to be able to vaccinate a maximum of 66,000 care workers per week from Jan. 18.

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In a tweet thanking staff involved in the rollout, Dutch King Willem-Alexander called the start of vaccinations "a turning point that provides hope of a way out of this crisis."

The Netherlands is in the midst of a five-week tough lockdown imposed when infection rates were spiking across the country. In recent days, infection rates have been edging lower, but the country's public health institute said Tuesday that the lockdown hasn't yet produced a clear effect on infection rates.

Nearly 12,000 people are confirmed to have died of COVID-19 in the Netherlands since the pandemic started, though the true number is higher because not all people who died with symptoms were tested.

Andre Rouvoet, chairman of the umbrella organization of local health authorities, welcomed the first vaccinations, which were aired live on Dutch television.

"It is symbolic of the hundreds of thousands—millions—of vaccinations that will be administered in the Netherlands in coming months," he said.