Ghana is first nation in world to receive COVAX vaccines

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In this file photo dated Friday, Feb. 5, 2021, Vials of the AstraZeneca vaccine and loaded syringes wait to be administered to homeless persons at the Welcome Centre in Ilford, east London. The World Health Organization Monday Feb. 15, 2021, granted an emergency authorization to the coronavirus vaccine made by AstraZeneca, a move that should allow its partners to ship millions of doses to countries worldwide as part of a U.N.-backed program to stop the pandemic.(AP Photo/Frank Augstein, FILE)

Ghana has become the first country in the world to receive vaccines acquired through the United Nations-backed COVAX initiative with a delivery of 600,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine made by the Serum Institute of India.

The vaccines, delivered by UNICEF, arrived at Accra's international airport early Wednesday and are part of the first wave of COVID-19 vaccines being sent by COVAX, an international cooperative program formed to make sure low- and middle-income countries have fair access to COVID-19 vaccines. COVAX is led by the United Nation's World Health Organization; Gavi, a vaccine group; and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, or CEPI.

Ghana is among 92 low-and middle-income countries that are receiving vaccines for free through COVAX. Another 90 countries and eight territories have agreed to pay if they choose to receive vaccines through COVAX.

The West African nation of 30 million has recorded 81,245 cases and 584 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic, according to figures from Ghana's Health Services Tuesday.

Ghana's vaccination campaign will begin March 2 and will be conducted in phases among prioritized groups, beginning with health workers, adults of 60 years and over, people with underlying health conditions, frontline executive, legislature, judiciary, and their related staff, Ghana's acting Minister of Information Kojo Oppong Nkrumah said in a statement.

"The government of Ghana remains resolute at ensuring the welfare of all Ghanaians and is making frantic efforts to acquire adequate vaccines to cover the entire population through bilateral and multi-lateral agencies," he said.

In a joint statement, the country representatives of UNICEF and WHO described the arrival of the COVAX vaccines as a "momentous occasion" critical to bringing the pandemic to an end.

"After a year of disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic ... the path to recovery for the people of Ghana can finally begin," said the statement.

The COVAX shipment to Ghana is the start of what will be the world's largest vaccine procurement and supply operation in history, according to the statement. COVAX plans to deliver close to 2 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines around the world this year.

"Today marks the historic moment for which we have been planning and working so hard. With the first shipment of doses, we can make good on the promise of the COVAX Facility to ensure people from less wealthy countries are not left behind in the race for life-saving vaccines," said Henrietta Fore, UNICEF's executive director.

"The next phase in the fight against this disease can begin -- the ramping up of the largest immunization campaign in history," said Fore. "Each step on this journey brings us further along the path to recovery for the billions of children and families affected around the world."

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