

Mexico begins vaccinating seniors against COVID-19

February 15 2021, by Diego Delgado and Rebecca Blackwell



People over age 60 wait to get the AstraZeneca vaccine for COVID-19 as Mexico begins vaccinating its elderly population for the new coronavirus in the outlying Milpa Alta borough of Mexico City, Monday, Feb. 15, 2021. (AP Photo/Rebecca Blackwell)

Mexico began vaccinating senior citizens in more than 300

municipalities across the country Monday after receiving some 860,000 doses of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine.

Most of the effort was concentrated in remote rural communities, but in a few far-flung corners of the sprawling capital, hundreds of Mexicans over age 60 lined up before dawn for the chance to get vaccinated.

For all the fanfare—military planes, helicopters and trucks rolled out starting the night before to carry vaccines across the country—the results were meager. By 4 p.m., only about 23,370 doses were administered. A few vaccination stations in the northern state of Nuevo Leon were unable to open because of a cold snap.

Mexico wants to apply all 860,000 doses in a week to 10 days, and Assistant Health Secretary Hugo López-Gatell acknowledged that Monday's roll-out had been "slow," in part because vaccination personnel sometimes arrived late.

"Regarding the situation today, in effect we have to acknowledge in a self-critical way, it was not speedy enough and did not have the finesse required for the opening day of vaccination," López-Gatell said.

Officials had encouraged people to not come all at once, but rather to spread themselves through the day, but with shots distributed first-come, first-served, the demand was immediate.



People over age 60 wait to get a shot of the AstraZeneca vaccine for COVID-19 as Mexico begins vaccinating its elderly population for the new coronavirus in the outlying Milpa Alta borough of Mexico City, Monday, Feb. 15, 2021. (AP Photo/Rebecca Blackwell)

"Today is a day to celebrate," said farmer José Luis González while waiting for his vaccine in Milpa Alta on Mexico City's south side. He said his family had so far been spared from the pandemic because they had isolated themselves at home, but he knows many neighbors who have died after contracting the virus.

"We feel very good and very grateful to the government," González said.

Health workers were collecting personal data, checking temperature and

blood pressure of those waiting for the vaccine and in some cases their photograph. After receiving the jab they had to wait 30 minutes as a precaution against any adverse reaction.

"We hope to live a little more peacefully," said Rosalba Flores.

The government has designated 1,000 vaccination sites, including schools and health centers, mostly in the country's poorest communities.



A soldier walks out of a health center where people over age 60 are being given the AstraZeneca vaccine for COVID-19 as Mexico begins vaccinating its elderly population against the new coronavirus in the outlying Milpa Alta borough of Mexico City, Monday, Feb. 15, 2021. (AP Photo/Rebecca Blackwell)

The goal, as stated by Michoacan Gov. Silvano Aureoles on Twitter, is to lower the death rate among the most vulnerable. He noted that the elderly are often infected by the youth who continue gathering for parties or other large events.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador conceded Monday that bad weather and snow had kept the vaccine from arriving to some isolated areas in Mexico's northwest. He said the armed forces, which are in charge of logistics for the vaccination campaign, were working to access those areas.

Mexico started vaccinating health workers in mid-December with some 726,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine.

In addition to the AstraZeneca shots, 2 million doses of the Chinese CanSino vaccine are being bottled in Mexico. Another shipment of Pfizer's vaccine is also expected this week. Russia's Sputnik V vaccine and another from China that have received emergency approval from Mexican regulators are also expected eventually.

López Obrador encouraged seniors to get vaccinated. "There aren't risks," he said, adding that the government's plan would make the vaccine available to everyone. "It's for the rich and the poor, it's for everyone."



People over age 60 wait to receive the AstraZeneca vaccine for COVID-19 as Mexico begins vaccinating its elderly population for the new coronavirus in the outlying Milpa Alta borough of Mexico City, Monday, Feb. 15, 2021. (AP Photo/Rebecca Blackwell)

Mexico has had over 1.99 million confirmed coronavirus infections and at least 174,657 confirmed deaths related to COVID-19. However, Mexico does so little testing that even government estimates of excess deaths places the real death toll at over 220,000.

The government hopes to have everyone over age 60 vaccinated by mid-April. The goal that would mean getting at least one dose into the arms of more than 15 million people in less than two months.

Mexico created a website for seniors to register for the vaccine, but it suffered from technological problems during the initial days due to the high demand. While some getting vaccinated Monday in the capital had registered on the site and received a text message confirming their slot, officials said seniors who showed up wouldn't be turned away.

Eduardo Clark, head of the capital's technology office, said on Milenio Television Monday that even those who didn't register online would be vaccinated.

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