

UN vaccine plan for poor countries nears rollout

February 15 2021, by Jamey Keaten



In this file photo dated Tuesday, Feb. 2, 2021, a mortuary employee wearing full PPE checks coffins containing the remains of COVID-19 victims in a refrigerated container in Johannesburg. 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/Jerome Delay)

It's nearly launch time for COVAX, the United Nations' unprecedented program to deploy COVID-19 vaccines for hundreds of millions in need around the globe.

More than two months after countries like Britain and the United States started immunizing their most vulnerable people, the U.N.'s health agency gave its approval Monday to a vaccine developed by Oxford University and AstraZeneca, which should trigger the release of hundreds of millions of doses by COVAX.

COVAX missed its own target of starting vaccination in poor countries at the same time as immunizations were rolled out in rich countries, and numerous developing countries have signed their own deals to buy vaccine, fearing the program won't deliver.

The World Health Organization and partners hope COVAX can finally start shipping out vaccines later this month.

Here's a look at the project:

WHAT IS COVAX, AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

It's a cooperative program aimed to make sure low- and middle-income countries get equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. Some buy them, others get them for free thanks to donor countries and charities.

COVAX hopes to deploy some 336 million doses by the end of June, and around 2 billion doses by the end of the year.



In this file photo dated Sunday, Feb. 7, 2021, Afghan health ministry workers unload boxes of the first shipment of 500,000 doses of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine made by Serum Institute of India, donated by the Indian government to Afghanistan, at the customs area of the Hamid Karzai International Airport, in Kabul, Afghanistan. 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/Rahmat Gul)

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said last week that over 130 million doses of vaccine have been deployed globally—three quarters of them in only ten countries. Almost 130 countries with 2.5 billion people

haven't administered a single dose, he said.

WHY IS WHO 'EMERGENCY USE' APPROVAL IMPORTANT?

Unlike most wealthy nations, many developing countries don't have the resources to assess whether vaccines should be approved. They rely on the WHO to determine if vaccines are safe, effective and have been made properly.

The most impactful moment for COVAX so far looms with Monday's approval of the AstraZeneca vaccine; the program has bought hundreds of millions of doses, although there is no guarantee when countries will receive them. The Serum Institute of India, which will produce the majority of them, has previously said its provision of shots to COVAX would be "calibrated" in line with India's own domestic and other needs.



In this file photo dated Sunday, Feb. 7, 2021, Boxes of the first shipment of 500,000 doses of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine made by Serum Institute of India, donated by the Indian government, await distribution at the customs area of the Hamid Karzai International Airport, in Kabul, Afghanistan. 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/Rahmat Gul)

But questions have arisen recently about the vaccine's use, given the increasing spread of the virus variant first identified in South Africa. Early studies suggest the AstraZeneca vaccine is less effective against that variant and South Africa's government delayed plans to roll out its own supplies of the vaccine. The WHO said last week the AstraZeneca shot should still be used in countries that have detected variants—but the head of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned the region's countries to prioritize other vaccines instead.

WHO GETS THE DOSES FIRST?

COVAX leaders haven't said.

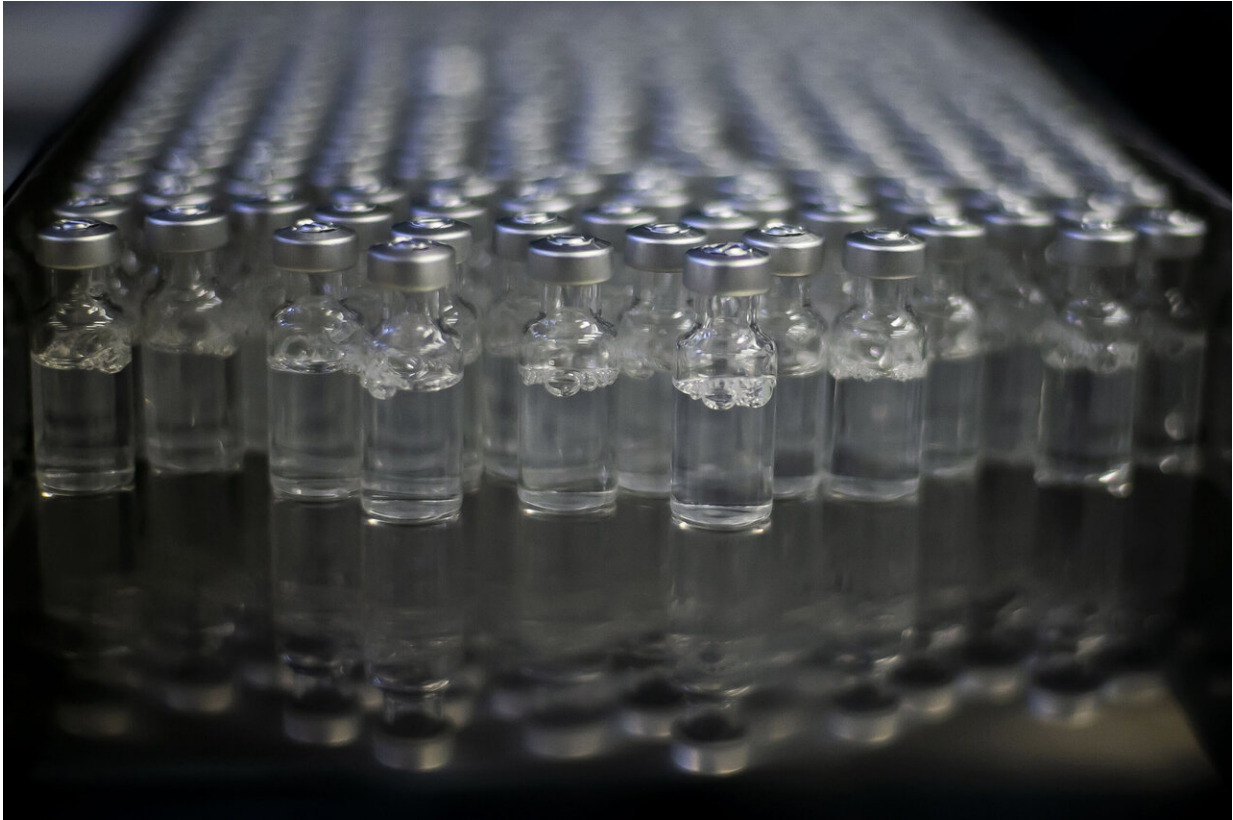
Gian Gandhi, the UNICEF supply coordinator for COVAX, said a confirmation of the doses that the U.N. children's agency can deploy will come once the WHO has approved the AstraZeneca vaccine.



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)



in this file photo dated Saturday, Jan. 30, 2021, a Moroccan nurse administers the Oxford AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine to a health worker, at Cheikh Khalifa Hospital in Casablanca, Morocco. 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/Abdeljalil Bounhar)



In this file photo dated Friday, Feb. 12, 2021, Doses of AstraZeneca vaccines for COVID-19 sit in vials at the Fiocruz Foundation after being bottled in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. 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/Bruna Prado)



In this file photo dated Thursday, Feb. 11, 2021, a health worker prepares a dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine to be administered in Fiumicino, near Rome's international airport. 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/Alessandra Tarantino)

The WHO takes into account readiness and need, and has placed a priority on getting doses to health care workers and vulnerable people like the elderly.

The deployment "will vary from country to country," Gandhi said. "In some instances, the timeframe could be in the range of days and weeks;

in others it could be several weeks."

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