

Seychelles bids to reach COVID 'herd immunity' by mid-March

March 3 2021, by Emilie Chetty



A patient receives an injection of the 'Covishield' coronavirus vaccine manufactured by the Serum Institute of India from a nurse at a hospital in the capital Victoria, Mahe Island, Seychelles Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2021. The president of the Indian Ocean island nation of Seychelles says he hopes enough residents will soon be vaccinated against COVID-19 to stop the spread of the virus, hoping to achieve herd immunity by mid-March by vaccinating about 70% of the population. (AP Photo)

The Indian Ocean island nation of Seychelles had one of the world's first COVID-19 vaccine rollouts, and this month it aims to again break ground by reaching so-called "herd immunity."

In an interview with The Associated Press, President Wavel Ramkalawan said that goal should be reached in mid-March, "when we would have vaccinated 70,000 of our people. That represents 70% because our population is 100,000."

The country depends heavily on tourism, and when COVID-19 vaccinations in Seychelles began in January, some workers in the tourism industry were among the first to receive them, along with health workers and the president himself.

By the end of February, about 44% of those vaccinated had gotten a second shot.

The country has benefited from so-called vaccine diplomacy. Its vaccination drive started in January with 50,000 doses of the Chinese-made Sinopharm vaccine donated by the United Arab Emirates, a close trading partner, according to the Seychelles News Agency. The Emirati carrier, Etihad Airways, has a substantial stake in Air Seychelles.

And India donated 50,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine made by the Serum Institute of India. The government of Seychelles, which has a significant population of Indian descent, said it purchased an additional 40,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine to have enough to inoculate 70,000 people.



A vial of the "Covishield" coronavirus vaccine manufactured by the Serum Institute of India sits ready to be administered, at a hospital in the capital Victoria, Mahe Island, Seychelles Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2021. The president of the Indian Ocean island nation of Seychelles says he hopes enough residents will soon be vaccinated against COVID-19 to stop the spread of the virus, hoping to achieve herd immunity by mid-March by vaccinating about 70% of the population. (AP Photo)

"We have a lot of good friends that love us," Vanessa Lesperance, a medical officer in the Indian Ocean island nation, told the AP last month. "That made it easier for us to get a steady supply of vaccines."

She added: "We're looking forward to returning to normal life." But Dr. Sanjeev Pugazhendhi with the government's health ministry, said the "new normal" in Seychelles will still include mask-wearing, hand-washing and social distancing at gatherings, which "I think are here to stay."

Such measures could be in place for years, depending on the vaccine rollout in the rest of the world, vaccines' duration of immunity and other factors.

"There will always be a continued risk of COVID ... until and unless the rest of the world can catch up as well," Pugazhendi said.

So-called herd immunity is reached when enough people are protected through infection or vaccination to make it difficult for a virus to continue to spread. The exact threshold for coronavirus is unknown, although some experts suggest that at least 70% of a population would need to be protected to hold the virus in check. The emergence of new worrisome versions of the coronavirus, however, is further complicating the picture.



Pedestrians wear masks as they walk on a street in the capital Victoria, Mahe Island, Seychelles Thursday, Feb. 25, 2021. The president of the Indian Ocean island nation of Seychelles says he hopes enough residents will soon be vaccinated against COVID-19 to stop the spread of the virus, hoping to achieve herd immunity by mid-March by vaccinating about 70% of the population. (AP Photo/Salim Ally)

Since the pandemic began, Seychelles has had 2,849 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 11 deaths, according to the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Seychelles' first two positive cases were confirmed on March 14, 2020, in a couple from Seychelles who had returned from a trip to Italy.

The country, like most other African nations, quickly imposed a nationwide lockdown in which most shops, businesses and schools were closed for three weeks. The airport was closed and ships were prevented from bringing tourists.

Restrictions continue on public gatherings, restaurants and bars. Tourists flying to Seychelles are required to have recent negative PCR tests for the coronavirus and have a seven-day quarantine period at a designated hotel with a negative PCR test at the end of it.

The seven-day rolling average of daily new cases has dropped over the past two weeks, from 49 new cases per 100,000 people on Feb. 15 to 32 new cases per 100,000 people on March 1, according to figures from Johns Hopkins University.



President Wavel Ramkalawan speaks to The Associated Press at State House in the capital Victoria, Mahe Island, Seychelles Thursday, Feb. 25, 2021. The president of the Indian Ocean island nation of Seychelles says he hopes enough residents will soon be vaccinated against COVID-19 to stop the spread of the virus, hoping to achieve herd immunity by mid-March by vaccinating about 70% of the population. (AP Photo/Salim Ally)

COVID-19 vaccines in Seychelles are voluntary and free. After those on the front line were vaccinated, the elderly were given priority. The shots are given in hospitals, clinics, pharmacies and some businesses. Now all residents can get inoculated, except for those under 18 years.

The publicity surrounding the vaccination drive has helped to dispel misinformation about the shots, according to medical workers.



Khamis Juma, left, receives an injection of the 'Covishield' coronavirus vaccine manufactured by the Serum Institute of India, from nurse Amelie Richmond, right, at a hospital in the capital Victoria, Mahe Island, Seychelles Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2021. The president of the Indian Ocean island nation of Seychelles says he hopes enough residents will soon be vaccinated against COVID-19 to stop the spread of the virus, hoping to achieve herd immunity by mid-March by vaccinating about 70% of the population. (AP Photo)



In this Friday, March 1, 2019 file photo, the sun sets over a small bay with fishing and pleasure crafts at anchor, on Mahe island, Seychelles. The president of the Indian Ocean island nation of Seychelles says he hopes enough residents will soon be vaccinated against COVID-19 to stop the spread of the virus, hoping to achieve herd immunity by mid-March 2021 by vaccinating about 70% of the population. (AP Photo/David Keyton, File)



President Wavel Ramkalawan speaks to The Associated Press at State House in the capital Victoria, Mahe Island, Seychelles Thursday, Feb. 25, 2021. The president of the Indian Ocean island nation of Seychelles says he hopes enough residents will soon be vaccinated against COVID-19 to stop the spread of the virus, hoping to achieve herd immunity by mid-March by vaccinating about 70% of the population. (AP Photo/Salim Ally)



In this Friday, March 1, 2019 file photo, footprints are seen in the sand on a beach on Mahe island, Seychelles. The president of the Indian Ocean island nation of Seychelles says he hopes enough residents will soon be vaccinated against COVID-19 to stop the spread of the virus, hoping to achieve herd immunity by mid-March 2021 by vaccinating about 70% of the population. (AP Photo/David Keyton, File)

"The moment we started giving out the vaccines to leaders, religious leaders and health workers, that started to subside," said Pugazhendi, the doctor with the health ministry.

When they spoke with the AP last month, Pugazhendi and Lesperance said neither had a vacation since the pandemic had started, with Seychelles' tropical setting almost always in view.

"We're looking forward to the end of COVID more than anyone else," Lesperance said.

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