# Syria's Idlib receives first batch of COVID vaccines

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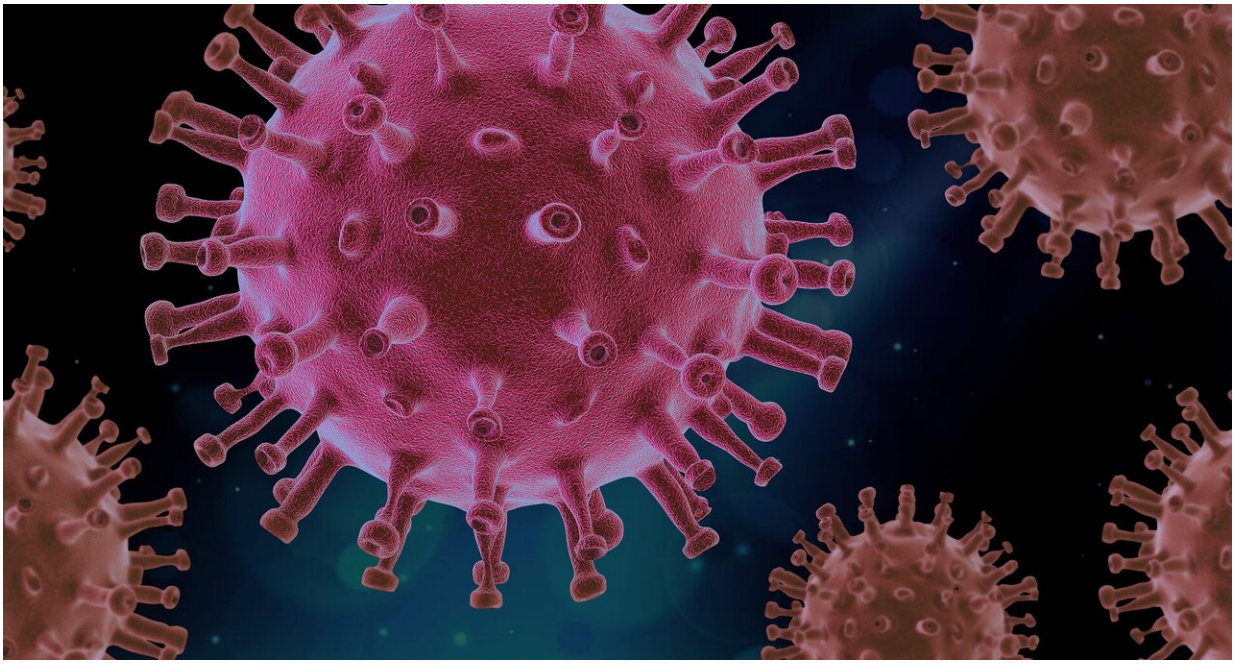

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A first batch of COVID-19 vaccines arrived Wednesday in war-torn northwestern Syria, an AFP correspondent said, where millions live in dire humanitarian conditions.

The 53,800 AstraZeneca doses were dispatched to the rebel-dominated region as part of the Covax programme, which aims to ensure equitable

access to COVID vaccinations.

Around noon, a truck carrying the vaccines crossed the Bab al-Hawa border crossing between Turkey and Idlib, an AFP correspondent said. The vaccines were then unloaded and placed in a cold storage facility.

"Today, we received the first batch of COVID-19 vaccines," said Abdul Hamid al-Hussein of the Physicians Across Continents group which accompanied the shipment into Syria.

The delivery is the first to Syria as part of the Covax programme, which has already sent vaccine doses to more than 100 countries and territories worldwide.

The vaccine doses are intended for the extended northwestern Syrian region, which includes jihadist-dominated parts of Idlib.

Mahmoud Daher, a senior official with the World Health Organization (WHO) said the UN is ready to administer jabs to the most vulnerable people.

"Once the vaccines arrive, we are prepared to start vaccination to priority groups through our implementing partners," he told AFP before the vaccines crossed into Idlib.

Covax is jointly led by the public-private alliance Gavi, the WHO and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations.

## Pandemic battle

The first categories of people to be vaccinated in the coming days in the Idlib region will be medical personnel involved in the battle against the pandemic and first aid responders.

The next group will be those above the age of 60, followed by people from younger age groups with chronic diseases, said Daher, who is based in the Turkish city of Gaziantep.

Much of the Idlib enclave is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a jihadist organisation that includes ex-members of Syria's former Al-Qaeda franchise.

Other regions of Syria will also receive vaccine doses through Covax, under which 92 countries are eligible.

Imad Zahran, a media officer for the Idlib region's health department, told AFP that the vaccination campaign was expected to begin early next month and would last about three weeks.

According to the WHO, a separate 912,000 doses have been allocated to Syria for a first phase of vaccination in regime-controlled and in semi-autonomous Kurdish areas.

The aim is to vaccinate 20 percent of the population by year's end.

Vaccination for health workers has started in government-controlled areas but not with doses received as part of the Covax programme.

The official COVID-19 death toll in Syria is low compared to some other countries in the region but credible data collection across the conflict-ravaged country is almost impossible.

Syria's war has killed more than 388,000 people since it started in 2011 with the repression of anti-government protests.

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