

Bhutan fully vaccinates 90% of eligible adults within a week

July 27 2021, by Wasbir Hussain and Rishi Lekhi



This photograph provided by UNICEF shows monks from Paro's monastic body perform a ritual as 500,000 doses of Moderna COVID-19 vaccine gifted from the United States arrived at Paro International Airport in Bhutan, July 12, 2021. The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan has fully vaccinated 90% of its eligible adult population within just seven days, its health ministry said Tuesday. Credit: UNICEF via AP

The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan has fully vaccinated 90% of its eligible adult population within just seven days, its health ministry said Tuesday.

The tiny country, wedged between India and China and home to nearly 800,000 people, began giving out second doses on July 20 in a mass drive that has been hailed by UNICEF as "arguably the fastest vaccination campaign to be executed during a pandemic."

In April, Bhutan grabbed headlines when its government said it had inoculated around the same percentage of eligible adults with the first dose in under two weeks after India donated 550,000 shots of AstraZeneca vaccine.

But the country faced a shortage for months after India, a major supplier of the AstraZeneca shot, halted exports as it scrambled to meet a rising demand at home as infections surged.

Bhutan was able to restart its drive last week after half a million doses of Moderna vaccine arrived from the United States as a donation under the U.N.-backed COVAX program, an initiative devised to give countries access to coronavirus vaccines regardless of their wealth.

Some 5,000 shots of Pfizer were also facilitated through COVAX, which is co-led by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the World Health Organization and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovation.



This photograph provided by UNICEF shows monks from Paro's monastic body perform prayers as 500,000 doses of Moderna COVID-19 vaccine gifted from the United States arrived at Paro International Airport in Bhutan, July 12, 2021. The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan has fully vaccinated 90% of its eligible adult population within just seven days, its health ministry said Tuesday. Credit: UNICEF via AP

It also received more than 400,000 AstraZeneca shots from Denmark, Croatia and Bulgaria in the last two weeks.

"Our aim is to achieve herd immunity among our population in the shortest possible time to avert a major public health crisis," Dechen Wangmo, Bhutan's health minister, told The Associated Press.

Many Western countries with far more resources are yet to vaccinate such a high rate of eligible adults.

Health experts say Bhutan's small population helped, but the country also benefited from strong and effective messaging from top officials and an established cold chain storage system.

More than 3,000 health workers participated and 1,200 vaccination centers across the country helped ensure that shots reached every eligible adult. In some cases, health workers trekked for days through landslides and pouring rain to reach extremely remote villages atop steep mountains to administer doses to those unable to get to a center, said Dr. Sonam Wangchuk, a member of Bhutan's vaccination task force.

"Vaccination is the pillar of Bhutan's healthcare initiative," he said.



This photograph provided by UNICEF shows airport personnel in protective suit handle unloaded consignment as 500,000 doses of Moderna COVID-19 vaccine gifted from the United States arrived at Paro International Airport in Bhutan, July 12, 2021. The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan has fully vaccinated 90% of its eligible adult population within just seven days, its health ministry said Tuesday. Credit: UNICEF via AP

Bhutan's government is also led by medical practitioners. The prime minister, the foreign minister and the health minister are all medical professionals. And frequent messaging from the government, which directly answers questions from the public about the coronavirus and vaccinations on Facebook, also helped combat vaccine hesitancy among citizens.

"In fact, people are quite eager to come and get themselves vaccinated," Dr. Wangchuk said.

Its prime minister, Lotay Tshering, and monarch, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, were also early advocates of the vaccine, which allayed fears surrounding the rollout. The king also toured the country to raise awareness about the vaccination drive.

Bhutan is the last remaining Buddhist kingdom in the Himalayas, but it has transitioned from an absolute monarchy to a democratic, constitutional monarchy.

Another crucial ingredient in the vaccine drive is the country's extensive network of citizen volunteers called "desuups," said Will Parks, the UNICEF representative for Bhutan. Some 22,000 citizens volunteered

over the last year and a half to raise awareness, dispel misinformation, help conduct mass screening and testing and even carry vaccines across the country's difficult terrain, he said.

Bhutan's success is an anomaly in South Asia where countries such as India and Bangladesh are struggling to ramp up their vaccination rates. Experts say it underscores the importance of richer countries donating vaccines to the developing world and highlights just how big an impact the government and community outreach can have.

"Perhaps this little Himalayan kingdom can be a beacon of hope to a region that is on fire," Parks said.

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