

In Iraq, vaccine hesitancy gives way to jabs as COVID spikes

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A soldier exposes his shoulder and awaits a jab to the amusement of fellow troops, a familiar scene in Iraq where a COVID spike is prompting more vaccinations despite widespread hesitancy.

At a Baghdad hospital administering the Pfizer/BioNTech jab, chaos

reigns as dozens of men and women of all ages stream into an inoculation centre where doctors are unaccustomed to seeing such crowds.

An elderly man shuts his eyes as the needle approaches, a young woman poses for her friends, and patients emerge from a room clutching certificates and looking relieved.

"In the last 10 days, the number of (vaccination) patients has risen to 600 or 700 people a day" compared with 200 to 400 previously, says Dr. Abbas Mohammed.

"The increase in the number of infections and deaths is really starting to scare people," he says.

This week Iraq reported 12,000 new infections in 24 hours, a milestone previously unreached since the pandemic hit in March last year.

On Wednesday, a new daily high was reached with 13,515 cases. The government is ramping up warnings and incentives for people to get vaccinated as well as to comply better with poorly followed health protocols.

"Up until now, I was afraid (of vaccination), but the worsening of the situation has convinced me," says Ali, a young man now "very excited" about getting his first dose.

The wait can last several hours, says 50-year-old Adnan Abdelhamid, bemoaning the "lack of organisation" and "the people who know someone and go before the others".

But the majority of patients are satisfied, like Salima Mehdi, an elderly woman whose head is veiled by a chequered scarf.

"I am so happy to be vaccinated, thank God," she says, her eyes gleaming behind her facemask.

Dr. Mohammed says the number of people vaccinated in the country each day has risen from 23,000 to 110,000 of late.

And despite the blazing summer heat, queues are getting longer in front of vaccination centres in the capital, in the eastern province of Wasit and in Iraqi Kurdistan to the north.

'Guinea pig'

The number of people to have received two doses reached 1.5 million this week in Iraq, a country with a 40-million strong population and where distrust of vaccines has been particularly strong.

"There is a jump in the rate of vaccination in all provinces," health ministry spokesman Saif al-Badr told AFP.

Fifty-year-old Ali admits he has long been afraid of the side effects of vaccines, an anxiety fuelled by misinformation, including from health professionals.

"But more and more doctors on TV are explaining why you should get vaccinated. We also see people around us leaving. So I took the plunge," he says, although the rest of his family have yet to decide.

"They are waiting to see; I am their [guinea pig](#)," he says with a loud laugh.

A doctor at a private clinic says his patients prefer to get treated for COVID rather than get vaccinated.

"Too many people still don't realise the importance of the vaccine and [preventive measures](#)," says the doctor who requested anonymity.

But "opinions change easily in the face of the gravity of the situation," he adds, and notes that the recent growing awareness is a "very good thing".

Iraq launched its inoculation campaign in March and uses the Pfizer/BioNTech, AstraZeneca and Sinopharm vaccines.

On a visit to Washington this week, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhemi said some 500,000 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine were to be delivered in the coming weeks.

More than 18,000 people have officially died of COVID in Iraq in the past 18 months, and the country has recorded nearly 1.6 million cases of infection.

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