

Thailand to join COVAX, acknowledging low vaccine supply

July 21 2021, by Chalida Ekvittayavechnukul



A person wearing full protective gear uses an ATM outside a bank Bangkok, Thailand, Wednesday, July 21, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Grant Peck

The head of Thailand's National Vaccine Institute apologized Wednesday for the country's slow and inadequate rollout of coronavirus

vaccines, promising it will join the U.N.-backed COVAX program to receive supplies from its pool of donated vaccines next year.

Thailand is battling a punishing coronavirus surge that is pushing new cases and deaths to record highs nearly every day. There is fear that the numbers will get much worse because the government failed to secure significant vaccine supplies in advance of the onslaught.

The spread of the highly contagious delta variant of the virus has exacerbated the situation, as Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha's government seeks to buy vaccines to supplement the modest amounts it has on hand of Sinovac and Sinopharm from China and locally produced AstraZeneca.

In addition to failing to buy enough vaccine, Prayuth's government has come under severe criticism because some studies show the Chinese vaccines are less effective against the delta variant than those produced by Pfizer and Moderna.

"I apologize to the people that the National Vaccine Institute has not managed to procure a sufficient amount of vaccines appropriate for the situation, although we have tried our best," vaccine institute director Nakorn Prem Sri said at a news conference. "The mutations (of the virus) were something that could not be predicted, which have caused a more rapid spread than last year. The vaccine procurement effort did not match the current situation."



Passengers sit spaced apart while wearing face masks to help curb the spread of the coronavirus at Suvarnabhumi airport in Bangkok, Thailand, Wednesday, July 21, 2021. The Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand has ordered a halt to all domestic flights operating from the most severely affected provinces effective Wednesday. Exceptions are allowed for flights to destinations that are part of a plan that allows vaccinated travelers from abroad to stay for two weeks on popular islands such as Phuket and Samui without quarantine confinement. Credit: AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit

He said Thailand is in the process of joining COVAX, a worldwide initiative aimed at equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines directed by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance; the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations and the World Health Organization. Nakorn said he expects Thailand will be able to receive vaccines from COVAX by the first

quarter of next year.

Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia that did not join COVAX. The government explained in February that since Thailand is categorized as a middle-income country, it would not get free or cheap vaccines from the program. It claimed it would have to pay high prices in advance without knowing which vaccines it would get and when it would get them.

"Buying vaccines directly from the manufacturers is an appropriate choice ... as it's more flexible," government spokesperson Anucha Buraphachaisri said at the time.



A giant classic Hindu Ramayana statue dons a face mask to remind passengers to keep to coronavirus precautions at the Suvarnabhumi airport in Bangkok,

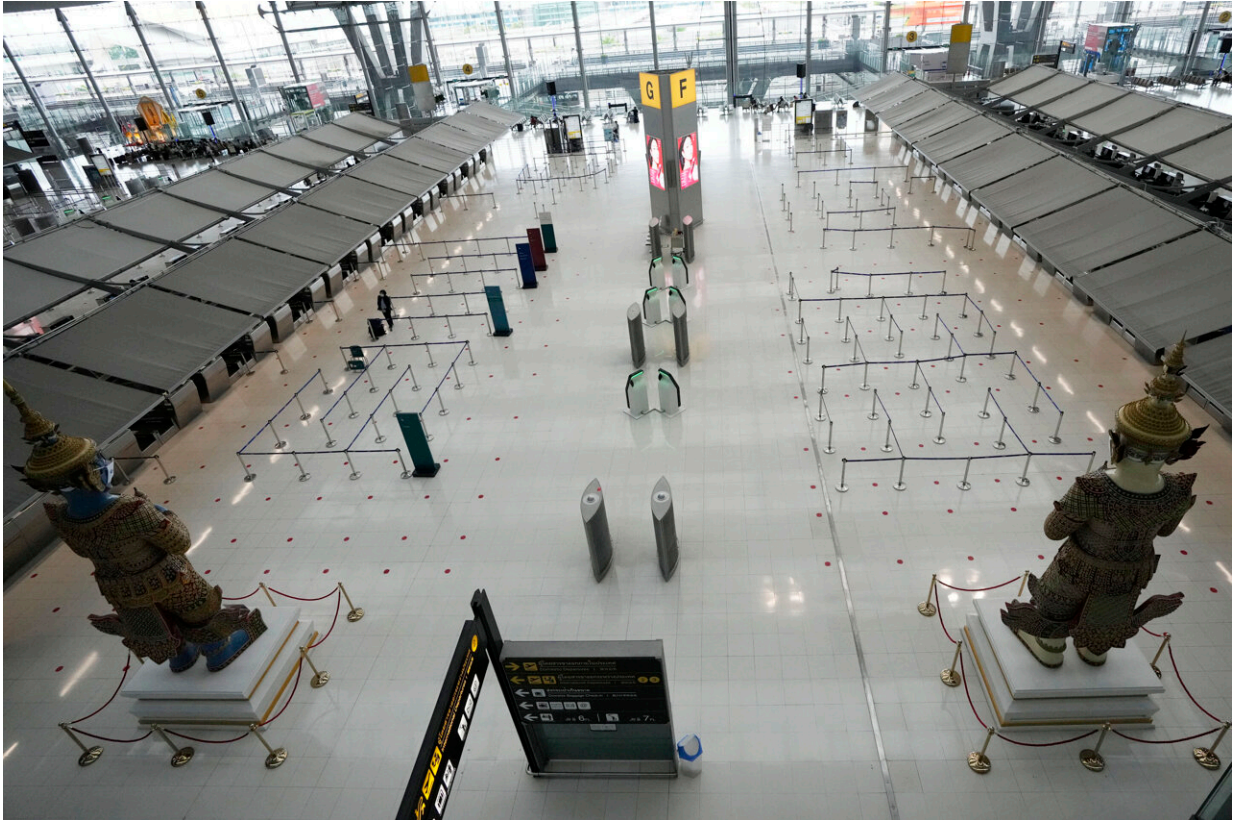
Thailand, Wednesday, July 21, 2021. The Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand has ordered a halt to all domestic flights operating from the most severely affected provinces effective Wednesday. Exceptions are allowed for flights to destinations that are part of a plan that allows vaccinated travelers from abroad to stay for two weeks on popular islands such as Phuket and Samui without quarantine confinement. Credit: AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit

That explanation was later criticized when the government urgently imported Sinovac at a high price even though questions had already arisen about its efficacy.

Thailand planned to administer 100 million inoculations this year and has reserved 105.5 million doses from several companies. Of those, 61 million doses were to be AstraZeneca vaccine produced by Siam Bioscience, a company owned by Thailand's king, 19.5 million doses from Sinovac, 20 million doses from Pfizer and 5 million doses from Johnson & Johnson.

Last week, however, new doubts were cast on the plan when it was revealed that Siam Bioscience is unlikely to be able to deliver its full share until May 2022 because of production problems.

Supakit Sirilak, chief of the Department of Medical Sciences, said at the same news conference that Thailand is still negotiating with other vaccine makers to secure additional supplies.



An empty departure terminal is seen at the Suvarnabhumi airport in Bangkok, Thailand, Wednesday, July 21, 2021. The Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand has ordered a halt to all domestic flights operating from the most severely affected provinces effective Wednesday. Exceptions are allowed for flights to destinations that are part of a plan that allows vaccinated travelers from abroad to stay for two weeks on popular islands such as Phuket and Samui without quarantine confinement. Credit: AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit



A marked seating and a janitor is reflected on ceiling tiles at the Suvarnabhumi airport in Bangkok, Thailand, Wednesday, July 21, 2021. The Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand has ordered a halt to all domestic flights operating from the most severely affected provinces effective Wednesday. Exceptions are allowed for flights to destinations that are part of a plan that allows vaccinated travelers from abroad to stay for two weeks on popular islands such as Phuket and Samui without quarantine confinement. Credit: AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit



A lone passenger wearing a face mask to help curb the spread of the coronavirus stands with his luggage at the Suvarnabhumi airport in Bangkok, Thailand, Wednesday, July 21, 2021. The Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand has ordered a halt to all domestic flights operating from the most severely affected provinces effective Wednesday. Exceptions are allowed for flights to destinations that are part of a plan that allows vaccinated travelers from abroad to stay for two weeks on popular islands such as Phuket and Samui without quarantine confinement. Credit: AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit

"Our target to inoculate 100 million doses this year is still possible," he said.

Thailand reported 13,002 new COVID-19 cases on Wednesday, another record high, bringing its total to 439,477 cases.

It has administered around 14.8 million vaccine doses, including 10.7 million doses since June. Around 11.3 million people, or 16% of the country's 69 million population, have received at least one dose.

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