

Rwanda breaks ground on first mRNA vaccine plant

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Rwanda and German pharma company BioNTech broke ground Thursday on Africa's first mRNA vaccine factory where cutting-edge treatments for diseases like COVID-19 will be made for millions across the continent.

The facility in Kigali is the first of three slated for the African continent and is expected to start producing mRNA vaccines by early 2024, BioNTech said.

Rwandan President Paul Kagame turned the sod at a ceremony attended by World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, African Union Commission chief Moussa Faki Mahamat and other high-ranking officials.

"This groundbreaking is a historic milestone towards vaccine equity," said Kagame.

Africa is the least vaccinated continent in the world against COVID-19 with less than 20 percent of its 1.2 billion people having received two shots.

The problem has exposed Africa's huge dependence on imported vaccines and its tech weakness compared with Europe, China and the United States.

"The best way to deal with inequity is to put the tools in the hands of

those who need them most," said Tedros.

BioNTech said it expects to employ about 100 local staff when the Rwanda factory is up and running and train them in making a host of new vaccines using the latest mRNA technology.

"The idea is really that... vaccines for African people are produced on the African continent," BioNTech CEO Ugur Sahin told AFP.

He said the technology being rolled out in Rwanda—and later at plants in South Africa and Senegal—would ensure vaccines are produced "at the same quality as anywhere else".

This includes vaccines against COVID but also pioneering treatments in the [development phase](#) for combatting major killers in Africa like malaria, tuberculosis and HIV.

Human trials for a BioNTech malaria vaccine using mRNA technology are expected to begin in late 2022.

"Why should people in Africa not get access to the most modern and best pharmaceuticals? There is no reason for that," Sahin told AFP.

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