

The joint UN-led COVAX initiative aims to start shipping about 90 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Africa in February, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Thursday. The immunization roll out will be the continent's largest ever mass vaccination campaign.

Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa, highlighted that the deployment is a “critical first step” to ensure countries access to vaccines.

“Africa has watched other regions start COVID-19 vaccination campaigns from the side-lines for too long. This planned roll-out is a critical first step to ensuring the continent gets equitable access to vaccines”, Dr. Moeti said.

The roll-out of the AstraZeneca/Oxford AZD1222 vaccine is subject to the vaccine being listed for emergency use by WHO, which is currently reviewing the vaccine and the outcome is expected soon, according to the agency.

Amid surging demand for COVID-19 vaccines, the final shipments will be based on production capacities of vaccine manufacturers and the readiness of countries, WHO added, noting that recipient countries are required to submit finalized national deployment and vaccination plans to receive vaccines from the COVAX facility.

The initial 90 million doses will support countries inoculate 3 per cent of the African population most in need of protection, including health workers and other vulnerable groups in the first half of 2021.

As production capacity increases and more vaccines become available the aim is to vaccinate at least 20 per cent of Africans by providing up to 600 million doses by the end of 2021.

‘Ramp up readiness’

Dr. Moeti also said that the announcement allows African nations to fine-tune their planning for COVID-19 immunization campaigns and called on the countries to finalize their immunization plans.

“We urge African nations to ramp up readiness and finalize their national vaccine deployment plans. Regulatory processes, cold chain systems and distribution plans need to be in place to ensure vaccines are safely expedited from ports of entry to delivery”, she added.

“We can’t afford to waste a single dose.” Additional doses

To complement COVAX efforts, the African Union has secured 670 million vaccine doses for the continent which will be distributed in 2021 and 2022 as countries secure adequate financing, according to WHO.

In addition, about 320,000 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which has already received WHO Emergency Use, have been allocated to four African countries – Cabo Verde, Rwanda, South Africa, and Tunisia – which have the capacity store and distribute doses at minus 70 degrees Celsius, the agency said.

The COVAX Facility

The COVAX Global Vaccines Facility is the vaccine pillar of the ACT-Accelerator, an initiative launched in April 2020 to speed up development of medicines to treat COVID-19 and make them available to people everywhere.

The global initiative is led by WHO; Gavi the Vaccine Alliance; and The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI). It works to ensure as many countries as possible cooperate to pool development, procurement and allocation of any COVID-19 vaccines.