

South Africa offers AstraZeneca jabs to AU

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South Africa said Tuesday it would offer its doses of Oxford/AstraZeneca COVID vaccine to the African Union (AU) after scrapping their use due to efficacy concerns.

The country suspended its vaccine rollout—meant to begin with the AstraZeneca shots earlier this month—after a study found the jab failed to prevent mild and moderate illness caused by a variant found in South Africa.

"The doses we purchased have been offered to the African Union to distribute to those countries who have already expressed interest in acquiring the stock," Health Minister Zweli Mkhize told parliament.

"There will be no wasteful and fruitless expenditure."

The continent's hardest-hit country by the pandemic had acquired a million doses of Covishield, a copy of the vaccine made by the Serum Institute of India, and was set to receive an additional 500,000.

The AU, through its African Vaccine Acquisition

Task Team (AVATT), has secured some 270 million doses of anti-COVID vaccine for the continent and last week said it would not "walk away" from the AstraZeneca formula.

It recommended countries where the South African variant has not been detected to proceed with the rollout.

Already, Malawi said it will forge ahead with its purchase of the jabs although the delivery dates are not yet confirmed.

South Africa has now settled for the yet-to-be-approved Johnson & Johnson vaccine, securing nine million doses, including 80,000 expected to be delivered this week.

Vaccination will begin with healthcare workers as part of an implementation study, Mkhize said.

Tulio de Oliveira, a South Africa-based professor of virology who helped identify the new variant, was optimistic the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine would prove a success in the country.

"It doesn't need the high levels of refrigeration, so a little bit easier to administer," he told AFP.

Those vaccines will be supplemented by 20 million doses of the Pfizer formula as South Africa embarks on an ambitious aim to inoculate around 40 million people—67 percent of the population—by the end of the year.

More doses will be secured through the World Health Organization-backed Covax facility and the AU.

The country has recently emerged from its second wave of infections, seeing the number of daily cases drop from highs of 20,000 in early January to just over 1,000 on Monday.

It has counted close to 1.5 million infections of which more than 48,000 have been fatal.

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