

Colombia 1st in Americas to get vaccines from UN program

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An elderly woman is injected with a dose of China's Sinovac Biotech CoronaVac vaccine for COVID-19 at the Jose Joaquin Vargas Special Women's Center in Sibate, Colombia, Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2021. The geriatric center specializing in treating psychiatric patients began vaccinating patients over 80 against the new coronavirus. (AP Photo/Fernando Vergara)

Colombia on Monday became the first country in the Americas to receive a shipment of coronavirus vaccines from the United Nations-backed COVAX initiative, a program meant to ensure that the world's most vulnerable people are inoculated but that has so far struggled to assist nations around the globe.

The arrival of 117,000 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine to the South American country's capital, Bogota, came a few days after the anniversary of the first case of COVID-19 found in the region.

The Pan American Health Organization said it expects to increase vaccine access in the region through the COVAX effort each month, with plans to bring about 280 million vaccines to the Americas and the Caribbean by the end of the year.

But the initiative, formed to ensure fair access to vaccines by low- and [middle-income countries](#), has been hampered by the severely limited global supply of doses and logistical problems. Although it aims to deliver 2 billion shots this year, it currently has legally binding agreements only for several hundred million shots.

The organization said in a news release Monday that 36 countries in the region will receive vaccines through the initiative. Of those, 26 will do so through their own funds while 10 will receive the vaccines for free.

"The arrival means that more [health workers](#) and high-risk populations can begin to be vaccinated," World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in a statement. "The COVID-19 pandemic can only end if vaccination occurs in an equitable way, and I am truly delighted to see vaccine doses in South America and other regions begin to be rolled out this week through COVAX."

COVAX is only planning to provide enough vaccine for 20% to 30% of the people in poorer countries—a figure that will still leave those nations vulnerable to [coronavirus](#) outbreaks. Experts estimate that at least 70% of a population needs to be protected against COVID-19 to prevent future epidemics.

Colombia, the third largest country in Latin America by population, had already begun COVID-19 inoculations, receiving its first shipment of vaccines Feb. 15. The government has said it aims to vaccinate 35 million people this year, including hundreds of thousands of Venezuelan migrants and refugees who are currently living in the country.

The country of 50 million people has recorded more than 2.25 million cases and over 59,700 deaths of COVID-19. Its government expects to get 20 million doses of vaccines through the COVAX initiative this year.

"Today marks a very important milestone, today COVAX makes its first delivery in the Western Hemisphere, and the first country to receive it is Colombia," President Iván Duque said during an event to announce the [vaccine](#) arrival. He added that the delivery makes clear "COVAX is active and works," and called on "all of us to accelerate the distribution of vaccines through COVAX in the Americas."

The Pan American Health Organization on Monday said all countries in the region are expected to receive initial doses of the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccines starting this month if they meet all conditions. In addition, Peru, El Salvador and Bolivia will also receive Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines soon once administrative, legal and regulatory requirements are met.

Last week, Ghana was the first country in the world to receive vaccines through the COVAX initiative. The West African country received 600,000 doses of AstraZeneca vaccines

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