Ukraine sets virus death record for third straight day

25 March 2021

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Ukraine has registered a record number of coronavirus deaths for the third straight day, authorities said on Thursday, as new infections also reached a record high.

The ex-Soviet country's ageing healthcare system is struggling to cope with the contagion and its COVID-19 vaccination drive has made a stuttering start.

Health officials reported 16,669 new infections and 362 deaths, which topped the previous records of 342 set on Wednesday and 333 a day earlier.

Health Minister Maksym Stepanov warned this week that the country was "entering a very difficult period".

Over the weekend the capital Kiev reintroduced restrictions to stem the spread of the virus, shutting cultural venues and large shopping centres as well as limiting restaurants to takeouts.

President Volodymyr Zelensky has come under fire for his handling of the pandemic, with some critics saying systemic corruption is to blame for a poor government response.

Ukraine, one of Europe's poorest countries with a population of 40 million people, has previously received 500,000 doses of the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine produced in India and marketed under the name Covishield.

On Thursday evening, the health ministry said the first batch of 215,000 doses of China's CoronaVac vaccine had arrived in the capital.

Ukraine has agreed to purchase nearly two million doses of the Chinese-developed jab and also expects to receive eight million doses of Western-made vaccines under the UN-backed Covax programme.

The country had expected to receive its first shipment of CoronaVac doses earlier this month, but a Ukrainian intermediary firm in charge of the delivery failed to supply the vaccine in accordance with the contract.

Ukraine's anti-corruption bodies last month launched an investigation into the purchasing of vaccines after critics accused the health ministry of overstating the cost of the Chinese-developed jab.

Stepanov said on Thursday that the delivery of new Covishield supplies was being delayed due to "a problem" with obtaining permission from the Indian government.

Ukraine launched its vaccination campaign last month, later than many of its neighbours. More than 150,000 people have so far received a first dose.

Since the start of the pandemic the country has recorded over 1.5 million coronavirus infections and more than 31,000 deaths.

Last week, Prime Minister Denys Shmygal warned

of the possibility of a new national lockdown and
 urged regional officials to impose stronger
 restrictions.

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APA citation: Ukraine sets virus death record for third straight day (2021, March 25) retrieved 1 June
2021 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-03-ukraine-virus-deaths-straight-day.html