

Vietnamese COVID vaccine goes to final trial, as Hanoi lags on shots

Shunning Chinese options adds pressure to domestic push for inoculation

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HANOI -- Vietnam's first coronavirus vaccine candidate is headed for a final-stage trial, giving a country that has accepted no Chinese-made shots a chance to gain ground on Southeast Asian peers in inoculating its people.

Nanocovax, a recombinant protein vaccine made using animal cells, was developed by a startup called Nanogen Pharmaceutical Biotechnology in collaboration with Vietnam Military Medical University. The first-phase trial began in December, followed by the start of the second phase in late February.

The final trial, involving 10,000 people in Vietnam, will be completed "in August or September," Do Minh Si, Nanogen's research and development manager, told Nikkei Asia. The candidate will be ready for public use later this year if approved by authorities, he said.

"We're doing better than we expected," Si said of the second-phase trials. Immune responses were seen in all 560 subjects. Si also expressed confidence in the candidate's ability to "quickly respond to variants."

The two-dose Nanocovax is "ready for emergency use in May" at the request of the government, he said. The company also is considering clinical trials in the Philippines, Bangladesh and other countries.

Do Minh Si, Nanogen's research and development manager, speaks to Nikkei Asia.

Vietnam could be the first member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to produce a vaccine domestically.

"We would like to support production as soon as the final trial is completed," said Vu Duc Dam, deputy prime minister.

The company is expected to sell Nanocovax to the government for about \$5 per vaccination.

"Our mission is to provide people with the cheapest possible supply," Si said.

Nanogen, a private company founded in 1997, manufactures generic drugs targeting cancer and hepatitis B. About 70 million doses of a COVID-19 vaccine could be produced yearly at a plant in southern Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City. If overseas orders boost demand, capacity could be lifted to 120 million doses by shifting existing production facilities.

Strict quarantine measures helped Vietnam curb COVID-19 cases, but community spread has increased since late April as infections rose rapidly in neighboring Laos and Cambodia. Yet Vietnam has reported just over 3,500 cumulative cases and 35 deaths, despite a population of roughly 96 million.

But Vietnam lags other Southeast Asian countries in procuring vaccine doses. Hanoi has territorial disputes with Beijing in the South China Sea, and Vietnam is the only ASEAN member that has not accepted Chinese-made inoculations. An Oxford University database estimates that only 0.69% of Vietnam's population has received at least one dose of a vaccine as of May. 5, giving the country the lowest rate among six major ASEAN nations.

"New difficulties have arisen in vaccine procurement negotiations. We even need to take a risk in order to gain access to vaccine sources," Health Minister Nguyen Thanh Long said at a government meeting in mid-April.

Vietnam has so far received less than 1 million doses from AstraZeneca, while approving the Sputnik V vaccine developed in Russia. Hanoi is now negotiating to manufacture Sputnik V and Pfizer-BioNTech's jabs in Vietnam, but local production will not start until 2022.

Meanwhile, Vietnam has three other vaccine candidates under development. The Institute for Vaccines and Medical Biologicals, affiliated with the Health Ministry, is expected to [complete the first phase](#) of clinical trials for its candidate in June.

U.S. President Joe Biden's recent support for a temporary waiver of coronavirus vaccine patents could hamper Nanogen, if it leads to a large boost in supply from pharmaceutical companies with better-known track records.

Additional reporting by Kim Dung Tong in Ho Chi Minh City.