

Vietnam accepts China COVID shots as inoculation drive stalls

Hanoi to give Sinopharm doses to people engaged with huge neighbor

TOMOYA ONISHI, Nikkei staff writer

HANOI -- Vietnam has taken delivery of half a million doses of COVID-19 vaccine from China, as Hanoi struggles to secure the shots it needs to speed up its inoculation drive.

The vaccines, developed by the Beijing Institute of Biological Products, a company that operates under the umbrella of state-run Sinopharm, arrived at Hanoi's Noi Bai International Airport on Sunday afternoon. Vietnam's Central Committee for External Relations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Health coordinated with the Chinese Embassy to hold an event at the airport marking the vaccines' arrival. The news was reported by local media.

The Health Ministry said the Chinese vaccines will be given to a limited number of people, including Chinese nationals living in the country, Vietnamese who intend to work or study in China and residents who need to use the Chinese vaccine, especially near the border with China.

The arrival of the Chinese vaccines comes as China looks to raise its profile in the region through "vaccine diplomacy." Another batch of Sinopharm vaccines arrived in Bangkok on Sunday, according to China's state-run Xinhua News Agency.

Hanoi's import of the shots follows emergency approval of the Sinopharm vaccine by local authorities on June 3, which allowed Vietnam to bring them into the country through the COVAX Facility, a global vaccine-sharing program backed by the World Health Organization. Approval of the Sinopharm vaccine followed approvals of vaccines from AstraZeneca, Russia's Sputnik V, and Pfizer/BioNTech.

The 500,000 doses are a gift from China. Vietnam is struggling to find enough vaccines despite having launched a public fund earlier this month to help pay for 150 million COVID-19 doses for 75 million people, worth \$1.1 billion by the end of the year.

Faced with multiple outbreaks at factories in the northern provinces of Bac Giang and Bac Ninh, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh set up the vaccine fund, aiming to vaccinate 75% of the population in Vietnam to reach herd immunity. Then on Friday, Health Minister Nguyen Thanh Long tweaked the target saying they will try to reach herd immunity, with at least 70% of the population by the year-end or early next year.

On Monday, Vietnam reported 134 news cases, with 96 cases in HCMC, 21 cases in Bac Giang, and 7 cases in Bac Ninh.

On Sunday, Vietnam became the last member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to accept Chinese-made COVID vaccines. Vietnam has up to now avoided procuring vaccines from China, as it could create a domestic political backlash, given the country's maritime dispute with Beijing in the South China Sea.

As Vietnam battles a rise in coronavirus infections, multinational companies from South Korea, Japan and Taiwan operating in Vietnam, including Samsung Electronics, Toyota and

Foxconn, have donated to the vaccine fund. However, progress with the vaccination drive has been slow.

As of Sunday, 2,422,643 doses had been administered in Vietnam, out of a population of around 100 million. Vietnam lags behind neighbors who have availed themselves of the Chinese shots, including Cambodia and Laos.

So far, Vietnam has mainly relied on AstraZeneca vaccines. Hanoi secured 2.4 million doses from COVAX, 405,600 doses from AstraZeneca via the Viet Nam Vaccine and about 1 million doses donated by the Japanese government.

Vietnam is also working on domestically developed coronavirus vaccine candidates. Nanocovax, developed by startup Nanogen Pharmaceutical Biotechnology in collaboration with Vietnam Military Medical University, started final clinical trials earlier this month. They hope to bring a vaccine to market by the end of the year.

Hanoi has not said whether it will require additional vaccines from China to inoculate people beyond those directly dealing with the country.

"The worldwide shortage of vaccines from the West has created the conditions for Vietnam to accept this vaccine donation from China and be more open in considering vaccines from China," said Ha Hoang Hop, a visiting senior fellow with ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, a Singapore-based think tank.

The COVID vaccine donation from Beijing is an outcome of the online conversation between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Nguyen Phu Trong, Vietnam's General Secretary, in early February right after the conclusion of the Communist Party of Vietnam's National Congress, Hop said.