

SA and COVAX

SA yet to provide clarity on vaccine procurement

Pauline Bax & Antony Sguazzin: Bloomberg, 3 December 2020 Khulekani Magubane: News24, 4 December 2020

SOUTH Africa is yet to provide clarity on how it plans to order vaccines, even as the global race to secure inoculations accelerates. The country which is hosting three trials, including for Johnson & Johnson and a partnership between AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford, yet has not announced a firm strategy to immunise a population that's bracing for a potential resurgence of the pandemic. SA did confirm last week that it plans to sign up to Covax, a global initiative that strives to ensure that poorer countries have access to shots.

The National Treasury has allocated R500-million toward the programme and will need to find a further R4.5-billion to move to "the front of the queue", according to Finance Minister Tito Mboweni. That payment has yet to be made, according to Anban Pillay, deputy director-general at the Department of Health. He said that does not mean SA will miss out on the first batch of available vaccines. Even so, that proposal will initially provide doses for only 3 percent of the population of about 59-million, Pillay said, or 10 percent over the longer-term.

Advance purchase agreements

The government has said that front-line healthcare workers and the elderly will be given priority, meaning advance-purchase agreements with pharmaceutical companies will be needed to protect the wider community. François Venter, a professor of medicine at Wits University and a former member of the ministerial advisory council on the virus, said there is a lack of clear communication from the government. He said people are sitting terrified, not knowing if SA will get the vaccine. The lack of progress comes at a critical time for the country, which is seeing a new surge in coronavirus cases in some provinces just as people prepare to travel to hometowns and holiday destinations. A need for further restrictions is likely to undermine President Cyril Ramaphosa's focus on economic revival. While Pillay said the government has been talking to "a number of manufacturers" about bilateral deals, other countries have already put pen to paper. The UK has secured access to 357-million doses from seven different developers. Brazil has agreed to buy a total of 186-million from a combination of AstraZeneca and Covax.

Pfizer starts engagement with government

In Africa, Botswana and Namibia agreed in November to procure sufficient vaccines from Covax for 20 percent of their populations of about 2-million each. Lwazi Manzi, a spokesperson for Health Minister Zweli Mkhize, said the Minister will make an announcement "in due course". Pfizer, co-maker of the vaccine approved by the UK this week, said it has started engagements with the SA government, without giving further detail. Aspen Pharmacare, Africa's biggest drug maker, signed a deal last month to manufacture about a third of the 1-billion doses J&J hopes to produce next year in an SA factory. Half the total will be destined for emerging markets under the Covax programme, according to Stavros Nicolaou, Aspen's senior executive for trade. J&J has offered the shots to SA at not-for-profit prices, according to Glenda Gray, CEO of the SA Medical Research Council and co-chair of the local arm of the company's trial. Shabir Madhi, a professor of vaccinology at Wits and lead researcher on the country's leg of the Oxford trial, said SA should be "in a favourable position to start negotiations with manufacturers". However, he said, the government needs to engage with the manufacturers.

Meanwhile, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced last night that the Solidarity Fund has committed to pay a R327-million toward Covax. He said South Africa was participating in Covax to “pool resources and share vaccine development risk and thus ensure equitable access to vaccines when they become available”.