

EDITORIAL COMMENT: Vaccine plan as clear as mud – Business Day (13 January 2021)

“Pres Cyril Ramaphosa will have to forgive us for not being impressed by the government’s vaccination strategy, which reads more like an exercise in damage control. Before their retreat, which was brought about by intense criticism from scientists and civil society, officials at the department of health were telling South Africans that vaccines were not a silver bullet. On Monday, the president told the country the government had always said they were a game changer, and now we are supposed to believe it has been involved in intense discussions with manufacturers over the past six months. What Ramaphosa’s words on Monday will not change is that SA has not vaccinated a single person so far, and we are not any clearer about when that will happen despite promises that initial supplies are on the way.

The US, a country led by one of the world’s chief Covid-19 denialists, started its process in December and has now reached about 10-million people.

Israel says it is on track to inoculate everyone over 16 years by the end of March. Leaving aside its racist decision to exclude Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, this has been an impressive achievement. They are not alone. Bloomberg reports that more than 29-million shots have been administered in 43 countries to date. Among emerging markets, even Argentina, which is synonymous with financial crises and debt defaults, has rolled out a programme that has reached 0.2 percent of its population, according to the Bloomberg data. So, it is more than a bit disingenuous for our government to cry poverty. We would hope our legislators will be filled with some embarrassment when the necessary processes are done to facilitate a flow of another R10-billion to SAA.

Even the President’s assurance on Monday that 20-million doses of Covid-19 vaccine have been secured raised more questions than answers, for he provided no detail on where these will come from. The government has so far clinched only two vaccine deals: one with the international financing vehicle Covax, which has committed to providing SA with enough to cover 10 percent of the population, with the first shipments due in April at the earliest.

Another smaller but more immediate deal with the Serum Institute of India is slated to provide its first tranche of shots later this month.

Assuming Covax sends vaccines that require booster shots, that accounts for 12-million doses. The arrangement with the SII provides another 1.5-million. So where then will the remaining 6.5-million promised come from?

A pharmaceutical company? The AU? Or a bilateral agreement with a government that has racked up more stock than it needs?

It is as clear as mud, and no way to inspire confidence in the government’s capacity to swiftly and effectively roll out a huge immunisation programme. The incompetence and corruption that marked the initial response to the pandemic and the acquisition of personal protective equipment are reason to be sceptical that this government can pull off what Ramaphosa said would be “the largest and most complex logistical undertaking in our country’s history”.

Health minister Zweli Mkhize has sought to use this crisis to argue why SA needs to move ahead with National Health Insurance, the government’s ambitious plan for universal health coverage. The level of disorganisation demonstrated to get even this far with securing Covid-19 vaccines, and that the government had to get the Solidarity Fund to pay its initial deposit to the Covax scheme, would seem to seriously undermine that argument.