

## **Vietnam backpedals on COVID-19 vaccination targets**

Hanoi struggles to secure doses despite launching \$1.1bn fund

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HANOI -- Vietnam has lowered the targets for its COVID-19 vaccination drive as the government struggles to secure doses amid a global supply shortage.

Vietnam aims for year-end or "early 2022 to inject two full doses of vaccine into at least 70% of the population aged 18 and over, to achieve herd immunity, bringing life back to normalcy," Health Minister Nguyen Thanh Long was quoted as saying on the Defense Ministry's website last week.

The 70% of adults represents a lower figure than the initial target set two weeks ago. Hanoi started a vaccine fund on June 5 intended to secure 150 million doses, estimated to cost \$1.1 billion, for the goal of inoculating 75% of the country's nearly 100 million people. Hanoi initially set a year-end deadline, but that target also has been eased.

At the fund's launch, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh called for donations from companies and individuals. The fund has raised 7.4 trillion dong (\$322 million) from multinational companies operating in the country, led by Samsung Electronics, Toyota Motor and Foxconn.

Chinh took office in April as part of a new Vietnamese leadership team, and the adjusted targets come at a politically delicate time as Hanoi prepares for the National Assembly session opening July 20. The legislative session, lasting 11 and a half days, is the first after Vietnam's general elections in late May.

Vietnam trails other Southeast Asian countries in its negotiations to secure vaccines, a political analyst based in Hanoi said. The nation also took a long time to approve foreign inoculations and was initially too dependent on the COVAX Facility, a global vaccine-sharing program backed by the World Health Organization, despite warnings of possible supply shortages.

The people are watching Hanoi's vaccine procurement, Pham Duy Nghia, the director of Fulbright Vietnam's master in public policy program, said in a June 19 webinar. This effort will gauge the government's success in seeking capital funds and conducting large-scale vaccinations, he said.

Experts anticipate that even achieving the lower target of 70% will be a challenge.

"Vaccinating 70% of the population by the year-end will be a tough mission even when doses are available," Nguyen Thu Anh, country director of Woolcock Institute of Medical Research in Vietnam, said in the Fulbright Vietnam webinar.

"Vietnam's daily injection capability is below 500,000 jabs," she said.

Only 2.9 million Vietnamese were vaccinated as of Friday, according to the Health Ministry.

"We are tapping all available sources to secure enough vaccines for herd immunity this year," Chinh said last month at a meeting to review the pandemic.

At a meeting with vaccine makers and scientists on June 7, the prime minister urged all sides to work their hardest, including by developing domestic vaccines, to help Vietnam meet its target of inoculating 75 million people.

Vietnam on Sunday received a gift of 500,000 Sinopharm vaccine doses from China. Despite a potential public backlash given the country's territorial dispute with Beijing in the South China Sea, Vietnam became the last member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to accept Chinese-made coronavirus vaccines.

These doses will go primarily to Vietnamese who intend to work or study in China and residents who need to use the Chinese vaccine, especially those near the border with China, the Health Ministry said.

Chinh later said he would allocate 11.58 billion dong from the central budget reserve in 2021 to contribute to the COVAX Facility, as more Vietnamese are willing to wait for Pfizer and Moderna vaccines.

Hanoi has approved the Pfizer and AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccines, as well as Russia's Sputnik V. The country has relied mainly on AstraZeneca shots. Hanoi secured 2.4 million doses from COVAX, 405,600 from AstraZeneca via local company Viet Nam Vaccine and about 1 million doses donated by the Japanese government.

Another potential source of vaccines is domestic. Local manufacturer Nanogen Pharmaceutical Biotechnology told reporters on Tuesday that it wants the government to grant urgent approval for Nanocovax, the company's vaccine candidate involved in final clinical trials.

Nanogen said the candidate had a 99.4% rate of producing immunogenic responses in the third trial. But the Health Ministry rejected the request on Wednesday, saying there was not enough evidence to approve it now.

Duong Quoc Chinh, a Hanoi-based political expert, told Nikkei Asia that Vietnam's current leadership is not necessarily to blame for tweaking the vaccination targets.

"The previous government was not prepared to partner with foreign vaccine makers to secure the vaccines," he said. "They were possibly counting too much on indigenous vaccine makers, assuming they could provide enough vaccines in time."

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