

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Asia > Burma / Myanmar > Health (Burma / Myanmar) > Epidemics, pandemics (health, Burma/Myanmar) > **Pandemic (Burma): Myanmar's Shadow Government Plans COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout**

Burma

Pandemic (Burma): Myanmar's Shadow Government Plans COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout

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Myanmar's shadow National Unity Government (NUG) is planning its coronavirus vaccine rollout for the country's people, with six million vaccine doses from a United Nations (UN)-backed program on their way. The hope is to cool down the deadly current COVID-19 third wave, as well as to prevent future possible outbreaks.

The NUG's Health Minister, Dr Zaw Wai Soe, said in a press conference earlier this week that the parallel government plans to get vaccines to people via India, Thailand and China with the help of existing ethnic health committees. The committees operate in territories controlled by Myanmar's ethnic armed organizations (EAO's).

Dr. Zaw Wai Soe said that the NUG would also seek help from third parties such as UN agencies for vaccine distribution and rollout.

The minister said Myanmar will receive more than six million vaccine doses, four million doses of Pfizer and 2.2 million doses of Sinovac, under the UN's COVAX program, a UN-backed initiative to vaccinate the world's most vulnerable populations.

"The vaccines have been donated by various countries and we are planning to start vaccinations as soon as they arrive," he said.

At least 40-50 percent of Myanmar's population needs to be vaccinated, "so that the country can avoid the fourth wave," added Dr. Zaw Wai Soe.

Myanmar is currently reeling from the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. In July, 6,000 people died of coronavirus, according to figures from the junta-controlled Ministry of Health and Sports (MOHS), making July the deadliest month since coronavirus was first reported in the country in late March 2020. Another 5,516 deaths were recorded between August 1 and August 26.

However, the actual death toll is believed to be far higher as the tally doesn't include people who died in their homes.

The military regime has been criticized, including by the NUG, at home and abroad for its mismanagement and lack of foresight in the fight against coronavirus.

Myanmar's COVID-19 vaccine drive was initially started under the National League for Democracy (NLD) government just a few days before it was ousted by the military's February 1 coup. The military takeover derailed the NLD's plan. The 27 million vaccine doses already agreed to be delivered under the COVAX program has been stalled since the coup. It is unclear if the six million

vaccines claimed by the NUG are part of those 27 million doses.

Currently, the regime has vowed to vaccinate half of the country's 54 million-odd people by the end of this year. As of Tuesday, the MOHS says more than 6.3 million doses have been administered to over 4.5 million people. Almost 1.8 million people have been fully vaccinated, while over 2.7 million have received their first jab.

Despite the NUG's ambitious plan for vaccinations, it faces possible difficulties in implementation.

As part of their vaccine rollout program, the NUG formed the National Health Committee in August with Ethnic Health Organizations (EHO's) active mostly in border areas.

While the NUG's collaboration with the EHO's makes it possible to vaccinate people living in ethnic and border areas, the parallel government's vaccine program will face obstacles in urban areas, where the military regime has launched crackdowns on anyone affiliated to the shadow government. The junta has branded the NUG a terrorist organization.

Padoh Mahn Mahn, the chair of the National Health Committee, said that the intervention of third parties such as UN agencies is an option to try and achieve the vaccine rollout.

He said that the vaccines will arrive at Yangon International Airport and will be provided under joint cooperation between UN agencies and some healthcare workers who have been on strike against the regime.

However, he admitted that the security of both the doctors providing the vaccines and the people receiving them is an ongoing challenge.

"We still need to find the means to guarantee their security," said Padoh Mahn Mahn.

NUG Health Minister Dr. Zaw Wai Soe said that striking doctors and healthcare workers have been planning the vaccine rollout since the third week of February. They have even drafted plans for the most remote regions of the country such as Chin and Karen states.

On Monday, the junta said that they will vaccinate members of EAO's "upon their request", as well as people in IDP camps. The regime's willingness to do so is likely a response to the NUG's plan for a vaccine rollout.

The junta stated that it has received a list of over 150,000 people older than 18 who are staying in EAO-controlled areas in Kachin, Shan and Kayah states.

However, EAO's such as the United Wa State Army, the Kachin Independence Army and Shan State Progressive Party-Shan State Army North have already vaccinated people in their areas last month, with vaccines and assistance from China.

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