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WORLD

Seychelles, the World's Most Vaccinated Nation, Sees Renewed Covid-19 Surge

The country is experiencing its largest coronavirus outbreak after vaccinating some 60% of its population, mostly with China's Sinopharm shot



The daily rate of Covid-19 symptomatic infections in the Seychelles has jumped to more than 300 cases.

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By [Nicholas Bariyo](#)

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Seychelles, which has vaccinated a higher proportion of its population against coronavirus than any other country, is struggling to contain a new surge in Covid-19 infections, raising questions about the effectiveness of [a Chinese shot](#) the island nation has administered to the majority of its vaccinated residents.

In recent days, a rush of patients seeking treatment has overwhelmed the Seychelles's sole coronavirus treatment center, as the pristine archipelago of 115 islands in the Indian Ocean battles its worst wave of infections, according to the health ministry. The daily rate of Covid-19 symptomatic infections has jumped to

more than 300 cases, bringing the cumulative total to 8,172 and forcing the government to reinstitute lockdown measures.

Although that number is low, it is an outsize problem for a tiny geographically isolated nation with a population of just 100,000. The daily case rate is a higher number of infections per capita than India's outbreak.

On Sunday, with hospitals in the capital Victoria overwhelmed with patients, the health ministry issued guidelines on how people who have tested positive for Covid-19 should treat themselves from home while the government scrambles to build more makeshift treatment centers.

The islands' renewed infection surge comes as a shock after the government vaccinated more than 60% of the population. Some 38,000 of the population was given the shot from Chinese state-owned firm Sinopharm and the remainder received AstraZeneca shots produced at the Serum Institute of India.



Some 38,000 of Seychelles's population was given a shot from Chinese state-owned firm Sinopharm.

PHOTO: RASSIN VANNIER/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

According to the health ministry, more than one third of new active cases are people who are fully vaccinated. Authorities in the Seychelles haven't said how many of those cases arose among people vaccinated with the Chinese shot.

"The rate of transmission remains high and is of concern," the health ministry said in a statement Monday.

In the Seychelles, "most of the cases which have occurred are mild cases," said Kate O'Brien, director of immunizations at the World Health Organization on Monday. "The Sinopharm vaccine really requires two doses. And some of the

cases that are being reported are occurring either soon after a single dose, or soon after a second dose.”

Christina Etoile says that her sister, Eve, a 42-year old nurse, got her second shot of Sinopharm in early March, but three weeks later, she got a high fever, dry throat and a cough.

“She tested positive for coronavirus and had to be treated at the same hospital where she works,” Ms. Etoile says. “I don’t think the vaccine gave her much protection.”

Sinopharm couldn’t immediately be reached for comment.

The situation is being watched all over the world for what it says about the effectiveness of vaccines.

The news comes after the WHO recommended the Sinopharm vaccine for emergency use on Friday, clearing the shot for global use.

The decision, announced by the international health body after weeks of deliberation, is expected to help alleviate a severe shortage of doses in the developing world, as vaccine exports from Covid-19-struck India grind to a halt.

It will also boost Beijing’s bid to play a leading role in the fight against the pandemic, officials and analysts said. The authorization came with caveats, as the WHO said there was too little data to show whether the vaccine was effective in people over 60. China’s five different vaccines haven’t been used widely in wealthy nations, but are already sustaining immunization campaigns across swaths of the global south.

But the doubling in Seychelles’s active cases have raised fresh questions about the effectiveness of the Sinopharm vaccine.

The WHO in April said Sinopharm was just over 78% effective in preventing symptomatic or severe disease in adults under 60, with little data on its success with older patients.

The United Arab Emirates, which has used tens of thousands of Sinopharm shots, asked some who received the vaccine to return for a third dose, citing low immune responses, though officials said only a very small number needed to do so. U.S. trials of AstraZeneca, meanwhile, have found the vaccine to be 79% effective

in preventing symptomatic and severe disease.

Both vaccines have performed more poorly than those developed by Pfizer and Moderna, which use mRNA technology and have reported effectiveness rates around 95%.

Data on the Seychelles outbreak shows the presence of a number of variants, including the South African strain. South Africa's government abandoned plans to use AstraZeneca in February after the vaccine appeared to be less effective against the strain.

"AstraZeneca vaccine is well-tolerated and highly effective at preventing symptomatic Covid-19, we already know our vaccine has saved thousands of lives," a spokeswoman for AstraZeneca said.

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John Nkengasong, director of the Africa Center for Disease Control, dispelled fears about Sinopharm's efficacy but voiced concerns about fully vaccinated people being infected in Seychelles.

"We are working with the government of Seychelles to understand the situation of these people who got infected after being vaccinated" Mr. Nkengasong said, "But we know generally that vaccinations blunt the severity of the virus."

The Seychelles's rising caseload marks a dramatic reversal of the optimism that followed one of the world's fastest vaccination campaigns, which started in January when the UAE donated 50,000 Sinopharm shots. By March, Seychelles had vaccinated nearly half of its population with Chinese inoculation, allowing the reopening of its battered economy and making it the world's most vaccinated nation, ahead of Israel, the U.K. and the U.S., according to U.S.-based data firm, Worldometer.

Sylvestre Radegonde, Seychelles foreign and tourism minister, defended the Chinese vaccine and insisted the country would continue to allow tourists, providing they followed social distancing guidelines. Tourism makes up around a quarter of the islands' gross domestic product.

"I don't think people should start questioning the effectiveness of the Chinese

vaccine,” he said. “The patients admitted in hospitals have mild symptoms.”

Seychelles’s main opposition said the deal to import Sinopharm, clinched during President Wavel Ramkalawan’s December visit to UAE, was reached without consulting public health experts.

“The level of political interference in the public-health sector is alarming” said Patrick Herminie, who heads the United Seychelles party. “The president did not consult health experts, yet this vaccine had not been approved by any reputable international agency.” The foreign ministry denied the accusations.

But the infection surge has caught the attention of many policy makers in the region, where the majority of the countries are relying on donated vaccines from [China](#) [and](#) [India](#).

Some epidemiologists say that by relying on donated doses, Seychelles ended up using less effective vaccines in a rush to restart its cratering tourism industry, leaving much of the population vulnerable. On Sunday, the government was implementing new preventive measures, including bans on the intermingling of households and the early closure of bars.