Israel to start COVID vaccinations on December 27

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Israel will start COVID-19 vaccinations from December 27, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Wednesday, as the country received its first batch of Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine.

Netanyahu, who was on hand as an air freighter carrying the vaccines landed at Ben Gurion airport, near Tel Aviv, vowed to be the first Israeli to get the jab.

The shipment was the first of eight million doses Israel ordered from pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and its partner BioNTech.

"This is a great celebration for Israel," Netanyahu said as a fork-lift truck started unloading the cargo.

"The first vaccinations will be given on December 27," he said later, noting the public health service would be capable of administering 60,000 inoculations a day.

"Tomorrow another shipment is arriving, a much larger one," Netanyahu said.

"I'm asking that every Israeli citizen be vaccinated, and to do so, requested to set an example and be the first person being vaccinated in Israel," he added, without saying when.

It came ahead of Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights, which begins on Thursday.

"We've brought great light to Israel," he said.

The Pfizer vaccine has yet to receive the necessary regulatory approvals for use in Israel, but Netanyahu said he would be meeting with the health minister and heads of the public health system on Thursday to prepare "the massive national undertaking" of vaccinations.

The results of third-phase clinical trials showed the vaccine was 90 percent effective in preventing COVID-19 symptoms and did not produce adverse side effects among thousands of volunteers.

Britain started inoculating its citizens with the same vaccine on Tuesday.

Israel has also contracted to buy six million COVID-19 vaccine doses from US biotech firm Moderna which are expected to be delivered in 2021, giving a total of 14 million shots for its populaton of nine million.

Both medications require two doses to be administered for optimal protection.

The Pfizer vaccine needs to be stored at the ultra-low temperature of -70 degrees Celsius (-94 Fahrenheit), posing handling and storage challenges.

'End to the plague'

Speaking at the airport, Netanyahu praised "our amazing logistical storage centre, which is a few minutes from here, with refrigeration and the

highest medical standards in the world".

Israel imposed a second nationwide lockdown in September, when the country had one of the world's highest per capita infection rates.

Restrictions have since been gradually eased in the country but infection rates are again on the rise.

The virus has infected 349,916 Israelis, 2,934 of them fatally, according to Wednesday's official figures.

While reiterating the need to keep up with "masks, distancing, hygiene and preventing gatherings," Netanyahu was nonetheless upbeat.

"We're bringing an end to the plague," he said in his Wednesday evening address.

On Monday, Netanyahu's office announced a sweeping night-time curfew but it has so far not received the cabinet approval required for its implementation and no details have been published.

On Wednesday evening, Netanyahu said the government would meeting the next day to finalise the restrictions set to be issued.

"We decided on taking the gatherings expected on the holidays, Hannukah, Christmas and the New Year, and limiting them to save lives," he said.

Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi meanwhile suggested Israel might provide vaccinations for Palestinians in the occupied West Bank or the Gaza Strip.

"We don't rule out this opportunity once we will have the amount that we need for our first responders, health community and others, and as far as I know they have already engaged with some of the companies," he said.

The Palestinian Authority says over 75,500 people have so far been infected with coronavirus in the West Bank and 712 have died.

In the Israeli-blockaded Gaza Strip there have been

about 25,500 infections and 155 fatalities.

On Monday, the enclave's Hamas rulers said Gaza had received 20,000 test kits from the World Health Organization, after warning it could no longer perform testing due to a shortage of equipment.

Facing a surge in cases, Hamas has also announced a lockdown on weekends lasting from December 11 to the end of the month. It also closed schools, universities, kindergartens and mosques.

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