

# Turkey launches vaccination drive with Chinese jab

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Turkish doctors and nurses rolled up their sleeves on Thursday as the nation of 83 million people launched a coronavirus vaccination drive with China's Sinovac jab despite conflicting data about its efficacy.

Health Minister Fahrettin Koca received the first shot of CoronaVac live on television after preliminary studies involving more than 7,000

volunteers in Turkey showed the drug to be 91.25 percent effective.

But a bigger trial in Brazil showed 50.4 percent efficacy and a third one in Indonesia pointed to a 65.3 percent success rate, raising concerns about transparency from the Chinese manufacturers.

Turkish television was plastered with images on Thursday of healthcare workers receiving their first doses as officials tried to raise awareness and acceptance of the vaccine.

"Our citizens should not worry," Recep Demirhan, chief physician at a city hospital on the Asian side of Istanbul, told reporters as he received his shot.

"We have conducted preliminary testing of all vaccines coming to Turkey and they are safe," he said.

One opinion poll conducted in November showed about half of Turkish respondents unwilling to take the jab.

But Koca said Thursday the number of healthcare workers inoculated within the first hours had exceeded 120,000 because Turkey "has strong infrastructure for implementing a vaccine programme".

The doctors and nurses lining up for their shots sounded relieved after a year fighting a virus that has officially killed 23,325 in Turkey and filled some hospitals in hotspots such as the capital Ankara to full capacity.

"We have been struggling for a long time," said Nimet Aktasa, a health worker at an Ankara hospital.

"I hope everyone reaches out for the vaccine as soon as possible," added Ankara hospital doctor Ayhan Karabulut.

The vaccination campaign is administered nationally through an online appointment system.

## **'Light at end of tunnel'**

After covering Turkey's 1.1 million healthcare workers, the vaccination programme will move on to essential workers and people aged 65 and above.

"This vaccination drive is needed to return to our normal, old way of life," Koca said on Wednesday.

"We see the light at the end of the tunnel and I believe the coming days will be bright."

Turkey has signed up for 50 million doses of CoronaVac. Twenty million of them are due to arrive by the end of the month.

The official Anadolu news agency reported that Turkey also sent 20,000 doses to the breakaway state of northern Cyprus, which is recognised only by Ankara.

In December, Turkey also reached a deal to receive 4.5 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech jab by late March.

Officials hope to receive up to 30 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech jab, although talks are still ongoing.

Turkey has seen its official daily death tolls slip back down to under 200 after imposing weekend lockdowns and other daily restrictions in November.

Last month, it began requiring passengers arriving from abroad to submit

negative PCR tests.

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