First shipment of Covid-19 vaccines lands in Cambodia

Prime Minister Hun Sen nominated ministers and generals, his three sons and the children of senior officials to be first inoculated for COVID-19 in Cambodia, as the first shipment of Sinopharm vaccinations donated by China arrived at the Phnom Penh International Airport on Sunday.

Mr Hun Sen praised Defense Minister Tea Banh for securing the pledge of 1 million doses from Beijing and added journalists to the list of “front-liners” who would be prioritized for vaccination, at a ceremony to mark the arrival of the first 600,000 doses.

After backtracking last week on pledges to receive the first injection after learning that the Sinopharm vaccination is only suitable for people aged 18-59, Mr Hun Sen said that ministers
and military commanders, senior officials and their family members who fall in the age bracket would take his place.

“I have three sons and three daughters-in-law. If they have enough condition, I allow them go to inject [the] vaccine,” he said, also naming Education Minister Hang Chuon Naron, Environment Minister Say Samal and Justice Minister Keut Rith among officials under 59 that would be among the first batch.

“We will collect all the children of high-ranking officials inject vaccine first,” Mr Hun Sen added.

Ministers Chuon Naron and Samal could not be reached for comments.

Mr Hun Sen said he expected China to fulfill a request for more donations and announced that India had approved shipment of 100,000 doses of its vaccination to Cambodia and that the two countries were discussing the sale of between and 1 and 4 million more.

He called for the Information Ministry to work with the Health Ministry to ensure that journalists under 60 were vaccinated due to the nature of their work – before returning to the topic of his cancelled inoculation.

“I was ready to inject it,” he said. “It does not mean that I’m scared of any reaction to the vaccine. If we inject, we can inject and it is not a problem.”

On Friday, Mr Hun Sen said in a Facebook post that Defense Minister Banh, 75, had already been inoculated, without specifying where, when or which type of vaccine.

General Banh and Defense Ministry spokesman Chhum Socheat couldn’t be reached for comment.

Srey Vantha, deputy director of the Preah Ket Melea Hospital and personal doctor to the minister, said that he was busy in the provinces and did not have clear details – but thought General Banh had been inoculated with the Sinopharm vaccine.
Prime Minister Hun Sen and Chinese Ambassador Wang Wentian at a ceremony to hand over COVID-19 vaccines at Phnom Penh International Airport on Sunday. Pring Samrang

At the ceremony, Chinese Ambassador to Cambodia Wang Wentian noted at the ceremony that China had also provided 10 million doses of the Sinopharm vaccine to developing nations via the global Covax initiative and

“China will continue to strengthen the cooperation to protect Cambodia from the Covid-19 disease,” Mr Wentian said. “[China] will continue to provide assistance based on its ability for its friend Cambodia to defeat Covid-19.”

The Health Ministry has announced that vaccinations will be directed to priority group members between the ages of 18 and 59.

Health Ministry spokeswoman Or Vandine declined to give more details of plans to roll out the vaccine, saying only that the Health Ministry and Defense Ministry would each store 300,000 doses from the first shipment.

Health Minister Mam Bunheng declined to comment.
China has administered at least 22 million doses of its Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines, which have not approved by the World Health Organization (WHO), and signed deals to supply at least 24 countries, with rollouts underway in Brazil, Indonesia and Turkey.

Chak Sopheap, Executive Director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, called for caution over use of the Sinopharm vaccine, citing Prime Minister Hun Sen’s backflip on stating that Cambodia would only accept WHO approved vaccines.

“The government claims that he will receive the vaccine first, but who receives it first is not the problem. What’s important is to guarantee that vaccines or any medicines don’t harm people’s health,” Ms Sopheap said. “It’s very important to be recognized by WHO.”

Yong Kim Eng, president of the People Center for Development and Peace, called for the government and Health Ministry to seek more information about the side effects and efficacy of the vaccine, raising concern about the fact officials learned of the age restrictions at such a late stage.

“It would be better if the government had more information about this,” he said.

Cambodia has registered less than 500 Covid-19 cases, including 81 migrant workers returning from Thailand, and no deaths, with most now recovered.