

## **Press briefing for Parliamentary Inquiry into Vaccine Rollout.**

Last week, South Africa officially entered the third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. These outbreaks can only be blamed on government's failure to procure the necessary vaccines on time, and its further failure to ensure a speedy and comprehensive vaccine roll-out programme.

Government clearly does not have a hand on the Covid-19 pandemic, and this undifferentiated approach is a clear example of its ineptitude.

It is common cause that the urgent roll-out of an effective vaccine programme is the only credible alternative to repeated lockdowns that costs our economy billions and destroys lives as well as livelihoods.

The government's original vaccination plan launched on 5 February 2021 was replete with maps and flow diagrams. It said there would be a phased roll out starting with healthcare workers, and then open up to include those with co-morbidities, frontline workers (such as teachers and police officers) and the elderly. The sophisticated document gave the impression that the Government's planners were on top of things and the prospect of vaccinating the country seemed real.

However as the past few months have shown government's roll out plan has been slow to start and even the current acceleration leaves the country far behind where it should be.

This is why today, the DA, calls on for a parliamentary inquiry into the Government's handling of its Covid-19 vaccine rollout in light of the fact that it has been marred by so many obstacles and failures, and that it is highly unlikely that the country will achieve any form of population immunity in the near future.

The DA will write to the Speaker of the National Assembly, the Honourable Modise, to request that she establish an ad hoc committee to conduct an inquiry into the Government's handling of its Covid-19 vaccine rollout.

It is clear South Africa does not have the vaccine supply it needs. Although Africa has been at the back of the queue for vaccine delivery, South Africa only has itself to blame for its slow and sluggish vaccine rollout.

By the end of May, only 2.5 vaccines had been delivered per 100 people on the continent of Africa. Yet South Africa has performed poorly even within the African context. Whereas South

Africa has delivered only 2.99 vaccines per 100 people, neighbouring countries like Botswana and Zimbabwe have delivered more with 6.38 and 7.45 doses per 100 people, respectively.

Additionally, South Africa is performing poorly against other emerging market countries with Hungary vaccinating 97.56 doses per 100 people and Brazil 36.76 doses per 100 people.

South Africa's first official procurement deal was struck with the Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access (Covax) programme nearly half a year ago, in December 2020. In December 2020 it was reported that South Africa missed the deadline for a first payment (of 9 October 2020) towards Covax. When the DA questioned Tito Mboweni in Parliament on 4 December about missing the first deadline (of October 9), the Minister responded angrily. He insisted that we didn't have the facts, that no deadline had been missed, and that we were misleading the public.

Less than two weeks later, and it turns out the opposite is true.

South Africa had missed the second deadline for payment (15 December) and more obfuscation from government followed.

Government made two crucial mistakes over the past year. The first was government's decision to pursue – exclusively – vaccine access through the COVAX facility. The second mistake is that government compounded the problem by not timeously engaging in bilateral agreements directly with manufacturers through an advanced market commitment mechanism. Many other countries, including middle income countries, did this as soon as vaccines went into phase two and three trials.

It's only after the public uproar that government appears to have been activated to engage in substantive bilateral discussions. The problem is that it's too little too late. Many of the vaccines, which have been authorised for use in North America and Europe, to be produced over the next 6 months are already earmarked to other countries that made prior commitments.

Eventually, South Africa paid Covax R280 million 5 months ago – and to date hasn't received a single vaccine dose yet.

Trying to spin its way out of the scandal through lies and deflection, President Ramaphosa blamed other countries for buying up all available vaccines. The truth is other countries bought those vaccines and South Africa didn't, simply because South Africa was never in the queue.

President Ramaphosa's claim that his government had been negotiating with suppliers for the past six months has also been exposed as a lie, not only by the vaccine manufacturers themselves, but also by the date on which the Department of Health applied to Treasury for

deviation from the normal procurement processes for the acquisition of the vaccine. According to a letter from Treasury, this application was only made on 7 January this year. This reveals the date on which they finally woke up to the crisis and started scrambling for whatever vaccine leftovers they could find.

The blame for our botched vaccine programme lies squarely with the ANC government, and President Ramaphosa in particular. And the people of South Africa are the victims of the government's failures.

After public uproar and continues pressure from the DA (through a High Court application), government eventually secured a deal in January to buy the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine from the Serum Institute of India, paying more than double the amount charged to the European Union.

Then in February a study in South Africa involving some 2,000 people found that the vaccine offered "minimal protection" against mild and moderate cases of the coronavirus variant that is most common in the country.

As a result, the vaccine programme was put on hold, and government sold its one million doses to the African Union. This however, as experts will confirm, was a grave mistake by government and one that has set South Africa back by several months in terms of its vaccination rollout.

The first phase of South Africa's rollout was rescued only through the efforts of Prof Glenda Gray (the head of the South African Medical Research Council) to secure surplus Johnson and Johnson (J&J) vaccines from trials in the United States (US) and Europe. Without this intervention it is unclear when Phase 1 of the vaccine rollout would have commenced.

The second phase, now fully in the hands of the government, is offering Pfizer vaccines to persons over 60 years-old. The second vaccine rollout faces two major challenges: getting the vaccines we already have into the arms of the people who need them urgently and ensuring that deliveries of vaccines continue to grow.

There is a worrying lack of clarity about Pfizer deliveries in July. The government announced in April that Pfizer has been contracted to deliver 16.5 million doses in the third quarter (July-September), i.e. an average of more than 1 million doses per week. A further 17 million doses are expected from Pfizer by the end of the year. But the delivery dates are not set in stone.

The other shock to South Africa's vaccine supply is, of course, from Johnson and Johnson. US regulators over the past few days declared 60 million doses of this vaccine unusable. Some vaccine batches have been cleared, and the Department of Health announced on

Friday that South Africa will be receiving 300,000 doses “as a matter of extreme urgency” from that cleared supply. This is a tenth of what South Africa expected to be delivered from Johnson & Johnson in the second quarter. The marks a further setback in the country’s vaccine roll-out just as a third wave of infections is gathering pace.

With new infections rising fast, we need to redouble the effort to vaccinate as many people as possible. Poorly functioning and overly controlling bureaucratic systems must not stand in the way of saving lives. We are at a crucial time where government is expected to acquire and roll out an effective vaccine rollout programme. The process until now has been marred with challenges – some beyond government’s control but some due to its own making. .

It is the DA’s considered view that it is in the interest of accountability and transparency that the National Assembly urgently conducts an inquiry into the government’s handling of its Covid-19 vaccine rollout.

The establishment of an ad hoc committee will ensure that deadlines are met and the process is corruption free. We submit that through an ad hoc committee parliament will be able to summon the executive, issue deadlines, perform oversight, hold them to deadlines and ensure that the task are executed as efficiently as possible.

Only a proper vaccine rollout programme will put an end to the continuous upsurge in Covid-19 cases in South Africa. Failure to do so is condemning South Africans to further devastation and economic ruin.

South Africans deserve an efficient and transparent vaccine rollout and DA believes that a parliamentary inquiry into the government’s vaccine rollout plan is accordingly necessary and urgent.