

Government releases list of vaccine recipients as scandal grows

Pressure grows on Alberto Fernández administration over 'VIP vaccination' scandal. Casa Rosada releases a list of Peronist leaders, officials, and their family members who received Sputnik jab.

The Health Ministry has released the names of dozens of officials and political allies who secretly got vaccinated against Covid-19 in an apparent violation of the country's guidelines, attempting to contain a growing political scandal.

The list of around 70 people disclosed on Monday by the Alberto Fernández administration includes leaders from the ruling Peronist coalition, mid-level government officials, and family members who received the shots. Among the names are Economy Minister Martín Guzmán, Ambassador to Brazil Daniel Scioli, as well as a number of businessmen. Former president Eduardo Duhalde, his wife, and their children also received shots. Even Duhalde's secretary and spokesperson Carlos Mao was vaccinated.

The release comes after President Fernández fired the health minister, Ginés González García, on Friday, when the preferential access to the vaccine was made public. The 75-year-old doctor released a resignation letter soon after.

According to government protocols, the 763,000 essential workers at hospitals are first in line for vaccines, followed by adults 70 years or older and seniors living in geriatric facilities.

Through last week, Argentina had administered 634,000 doses of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, produced by the Gamaleya Research Institute, with support from the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF).

The government issued a clarification Monday that people with "strategic functions" qualify for vaccinations, though offered no explanation for why other individuals, including family members, jumped the queue.

Argentina, with 44 million inhabitants, has recorded more than two million

infections of Covid-19 to date, with more than 51,000 deaths. So far, the country has received 1.22 million doses of Sputnik V and 580,000 of Covishield, produced by India's Serum Institute.

'VIP vaccination'

The developing scandal, dubbed "VIP Vaccination" by the local press, is particularly damaging for the president, who for months has promised that vaccines would be distributed fairly, ahead of midterm elections in October. Fernández's government is also way off its inoculation target, having promised to vaccinate 10 million people by the end of February.

Among those on the list were the president's "health bubble" – i.e. his inner circle; close friend and Frente de Todos lawmaker Eduardo Valdés, 65; Foreign Minister Felipe Solá, 70; Treasury Attorney Carlos Zannini, 66; Guzmán, who is 38, and several of his advisers; and former president Eduardo Duhalde, 79, together with his wife Hilda González and their daughters, Juliana and María Eva.

In Guzmán's case, the government justified his jab by his need to travel for talks with the International Monetary Fund and be involved in face-to-face discussions with the Fund's officials.

The list includes people who were vaccinated at Argentina's Health Ministry in downtown Buenos Aires and Hospital Nacional Posadas in El Palomar, Buenos Aires Province.

The list has been released in a bid to head off growing criticism of the government over the issue, especially from the opposition Juntos por el Cambio coalition. But while officials argued that this was a move towards transparency, the list does not include other leaders who received vaccines, such as Vice-President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (recently turned 68), who was vaccinated at a different hospital in January. The former president shared images of her receiving a jab on her social media accounts.

According to reports in the local press, the government plans to give the second Sputnik shot to all those who have been previously vaccinated, whether in or out of line.

Scandal

The scandal broke at the end of last week, when 71-year-old journalist Horacio Verbitsky announced on the radio that, owing to his longstanding friendship with González García, he had been able to get vaccinated in his office ahead of the general population.

Since Argentina began vaccinating its people, only healthcare workers had received the jab until Wednesday, when over-70s in Buenos Aires Province were also invited to be immunized. Other regions are now rolling out shots to those aged 70 and over, subject to the amount of doses they have been designated.

"I don't tolerate things like this, nor do I do things like this. I drive my own car; when I wasn't a government official and I was invited to skip the queue via the VIP lounge, I refused it. As president I cannot allow these privileges to be granted," said Fernández.

New Health Minister Carla Vizzotti insisted on Sunday that "in no way was there a VIP immunization" programme, telling a local radio station that the scandal involved "a small number of people" and that there was no policy of "reserving vaccines for a privileged situation."

On Monday, she reiterated those claims, saying there was no parallel vaccination scheme and arguing that the "vast majority of those vaccinated are strategic personnel." She rejected claims that 3,000 doses stored at the Posadas were deployed on a "discretionary" basis by the government, though she recognized there were "irregular cases." An internal investigation would take place, she said.

Analysts say this will hurt the government significantly, though the midterms remain a way off.

"It is going to have a lot of impact in the short term: this is a sensitive and irritating issue, what dampens it is that the president has reacted quickly and forcefully" in requesting the resignation of the then-health minister," political consultant Carlos Fara told AFP.

At least 15 criminal complaints have been filed against González García and on Monday night, police entered the Health Ministry's offices to search for records of

individuals who entered the building between February 1 and 19, according to judicial sources cited in the local press.

Fara warns that the scandal will continue to rage for now. "The issue is not over, there will be more [names]," he said. "I think that in the short or long term this will be resolved with millions of vaccines - as long as there are vaccines for everyone, [the fact] that some have been vaccinated, it will be irrelevant."

Source:

<https://www.batimes.com.ar/news/argentina/government-releases-list-of-vaccine-recipients-as-scandal-grows.phtml>

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