

VACCINE NATIONALISM

Virus cannot be controlled by creating islands, says Karim

Tamar Kahn

As SA marks a year since its first coronavirus case was confirmed on March 5 2020, one of the government's top scientific advisers has sounded a stark warning about the dangers of vaccine nationalism, saying the rush by wealthier countries to protect their entire populations at the expense of poorer nations

risks prolonging the pandemic.

The emergence of coronavirus variants in several parts of the world has undermined hope that vaccines would provide a quick end to the pandemic, and suggests the virus will be with us for years to come.

The more the virus transmits, the greater the risk of new variants, and countries that inoculated their entire populations

could find their gains short-lived if the virus circulated unfettered in other parts of the world, said KwaZulu-Natal epidemiologist Salim Abdool Karim, who co-chairs the national advisory committee on Covid-19.

"It is nonsensical to think you can control the virus by creating islands," Karim said.

"We can't have individual countries jockeying against each

other. We have to find a solution – which is already there in the form of Covax – that allows us to vaccinate all countries at a similar rate."

Covax is an international financing mechanism for Covid-19 vaccines, co-ordinated by the World Health Organization, the vaccine alliance Gavi and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations.

"SA is as guilty as many other countries," Karim said in a virtual press briefing.

"As much as we have committed to Covax, we have gone around it. We have negotiated and paid high prices and secured vaccines early to jump the queue because there was political pressure to do so".

Covax aims to equitably distribute the vaccines it procures

on behalf of participating nations and hopes to distribute 2-billion doses by the end of 2021.

Its first distribution plan, published on March 2, sets out the first round of allocations to 142 countries, based on their population size.

It has earmarked 117,000 doses of Pfizer's shot and 2.4-million doses of AstraZeneca's jab for SA, but the government

has already indicated it will not be taking the AstraZeneca vaccines as a small clinical trial in SA found it offered only minimal protection against the new variant dominating transmission in SA.

By Wednesday evening, SA had recorded more than 1.5-million coronavirus infections and more than 50,000 deaths from Covid-19.