

Bangladesh celebrates 50 years of independence

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) — Fifty years ago on the night of March 25, 1971, Pakistan's military launched a violent crackdown on the city of Dhaka, then part of East Pakistan, to quell a rising nationalist movement seeking independence for what is today known as Bangladesh.

Soldiers stormed the dormitories of students and teachers at Dhaka University, dragging them out and blindfolding them before killing them. Elsewhere in the city, soldiers attacked a police barracks and shot civilians on the streets.

Just hours later amid the violence and chaos — early on March 26 — Bengali nationalist politician Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared independence for Bangladesh, sparking a nine-month war.

The fight for independence can be traced back to Britain's colonial rule of the Indian subcontinent and the new nations that were carved out after its end in 1947. There was India and Pakistan, the latter split into West Pakistan and East Pakistan.

While most in West Pakistan and East Pakistan shared a common religion — Islam — there were key differences, including language, with Bengali being widely spoken in East Pakistan and Urdu in West Pakistan. That became a point of tension in East Pakistan as the West's Urdu-speaking elite rose to power.

For years, hostilities and strikes dominated East Pakistan as calls for independence grew louder. A watershed moment occurred in 1970, when Rahman's Awami League swept the polls in a national election. The



INDEPENDENCE ANNIVERSARY. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, left, receives a bouquet of flowers from Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Modi arrived in Bangladesh's capital to join celebrations marking 50 years of the country's independence. (Photo/Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi's twitter handle via AP)

military rejected the results, leading to a civil disobedience movement and more calls for independence.

The military responded with Operation Searchlight, the crackdown launched that March night in 1971.

The war would rage until December, when India joined on the side of Bangladesh. Finally on December 16, 1971, Pakistan forces surrendered and Bangladesh celebrated its freedom.

Hong Kong halts use of Pfizer vaccine, cites defective lids

By Zen Soo
The Associated Press

HONG KONG — Hong Kong suspended its use of the Pfizer vaccine on March 24 after its Chinese distributor informed the city that one batch had defective bottle lids.

The city's government said a suspension began immediately for an investigation by distributor Fosun Pharma and BioNTech, the German company that created the vaccine with American pharmaceutical firm Pfizer.

BioNTech and Fosun Pharma have not found any reason to believe the product is unsafe, according to the statement. However, vaccinations were halted as a preventive and safety measure.

The defective lids were found on vaccines from batch number 210102. A separate batch of vaccines, 210104, was also not administered.

The semi-autonomous territory of Macao also said its residents will not receive the Pfizer shots from the same batch.

The vaccines from the batch comprise a total of 585,000 doses, with the other batch number 210104 holding 758,000 doses, according to Hong Kong's director of health, Constance Chan.

Although about 150,000 doses from batch 210102 had already been administered in the city, officials said during a press briefing that the vaccines were safe to use despite the packaging defects, and that suspending the vaccination was a precautionary measure. Batch number 210104 remains in the warehouse and has not been used.

Chan said there were over 40 instances when medical personnel found defective packaging, such as cracks on the vaccine bottles or leakages when the vaccine was diluted with saline before being administered.

None of these vaccines were given to residents and they were thrown away, officials said.

"Fosun has promised to carry out an immediate investigation so they are going to approach the manufacturer in Germany to look into their plant," Chan said. "When the vaccines arrive in Hong Kong, they will have a review of the whole logistics chain to see if that's the cause of the current situation."

She said officials urged manufacturers to give a report as soon as possible to check if the batches of vaccines in Hong Kong could be used, otherwise the manufacturers would have to deliver another batch of shots as soon as possible.

Residents slated to receive their second Pfizer dose were told to get the second shot administered as soon as possible if new vaccines arrived in Hong Kong after the recommended 19- to 42-day window after the first dose.

BioNTech said in a statement that it had launched an investigation to find the "root cause" of the vaccine packaging issues. It said the investigation would look into the entire supply chain of the vaccines from the time the vials were filled all the way to their handling at vaccination centers.

"The safety of our vaccines and patients is of utmost importance to BioNTech," the statement said. "At this point, we have no reason to believe there is any safety risk



DEFECTIVE LIDS. A notice of vaccine suspension is seen outside a vaccination center for BioNTech in Hong Kong. Hong Kong suspended vaccinations using Pfizer shots — also known as BioNTech shots in the city — after they were informed by distributor Fosun that one batch had defective bottle lids. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

posed to the population."

The company also said that no other region aside from Hong Kong and Macao had been supplied with doses from the affected batch.

Fosun Pharma said in a filing to the Hong Kong stock exchange that it received notice from BioNTech regarding the packaging defects the night of March 23 and informed Hong Kong and Macao authorities the next day to temporarily suspend the vaccines.

The suspension of the Pfizer jab means the only vaccine available to residents is China's Sinovac. The two vaccines are the only ones that were offered to residents in Hong Kong.

German expatriate Jannis Partsafas was among a group of people who received the Pfizer shot ahead of the suspension.

"I got vaccinated this morning at 8.30am before the news went public about the vaccine suspension, and heard the news when I was on my way home," said 32-year-old Partsafas, who works in the sporting goods industry.

"I'm not very concerned about the safety, but I am worried that this may mean more people will turn down the option of getting vaccinated in Hong Kong which would impact herd immunity and the lifting of social-distancing measures," he said.

Some residents who had appointments to receive the Pfizer shots stood in line outside a community center in the city's Sai Ying Pun neighborhood at about 10:30am. They eventually left when it became clear the vaccines would not be administered.

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