

Namibia's pandemic-hit tourist sector launches vaccination drive

By Nyasha Nyaungwa

19 Jan 2022

Namibia's pandemic-ravaged tourism sector has launched a campaign to encourage its employees to get inoculated against Covid-19 as vaccine hesitancy threatens to derail the sector's revival.



Foreign tourists in safari riverboats observe elephants along the Chobe river bank near Botswana's northern border where [Zimbabwe, Zambia and Namibia] meet in this file picture

According to the World Health Organisation, Namibia is one of four countries - including Angola, Eswatini and Lesotho - in the southern African region that failed to meet a global 40% vaccination target by December 2021.

As of Monday, only 351,690 people or 19.8% of a revised eligible target population of 1.7 million have been fully vaccinated in the southwest African country, which has seen a surge in hospitalisations and deaths from the dominant Omicron variant.

Namibia recently adjusted its eligible population from 1.5 million after allowing Pfizer doses for children aged between 12 and 17 years, beginning December 2021.

"These figures are still far behind where we need to be as a country to control the pandemic," Ben Nangombe, a senior health ministry official, said during the launch of the campaign.

He said the ministry appreciated the tourism industry's initiative, which seeks to boost vaccinations among employees to reduce the inherent health risks associated with hosting and engaging guests.

Tourism officials are worried by the low vaccination rate they say pose a threat to business due to declining confidence among potential foreign visitors to Namibia's stark desert-meets-ocean landscape and famous game reserves.

Tourism is a major contributor to Namibia's gross domestic product and job creation, with a study published by the government in October showing that 30% of jobs shed between Jan. 1, 2020, and Sept. 30, 2021, were from the sector.

Hotel room occupancy was at 23% in 2021 compared to 53% before the pandemic, official statistics showed.

President Hage Geingob told reporters on Thursday that voluntary vaccination was becoming problematic, although the official state policy on no mandatory vaccination remains.

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