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Serbia Starts COVID-19 Vaccinations at Migrant Camps

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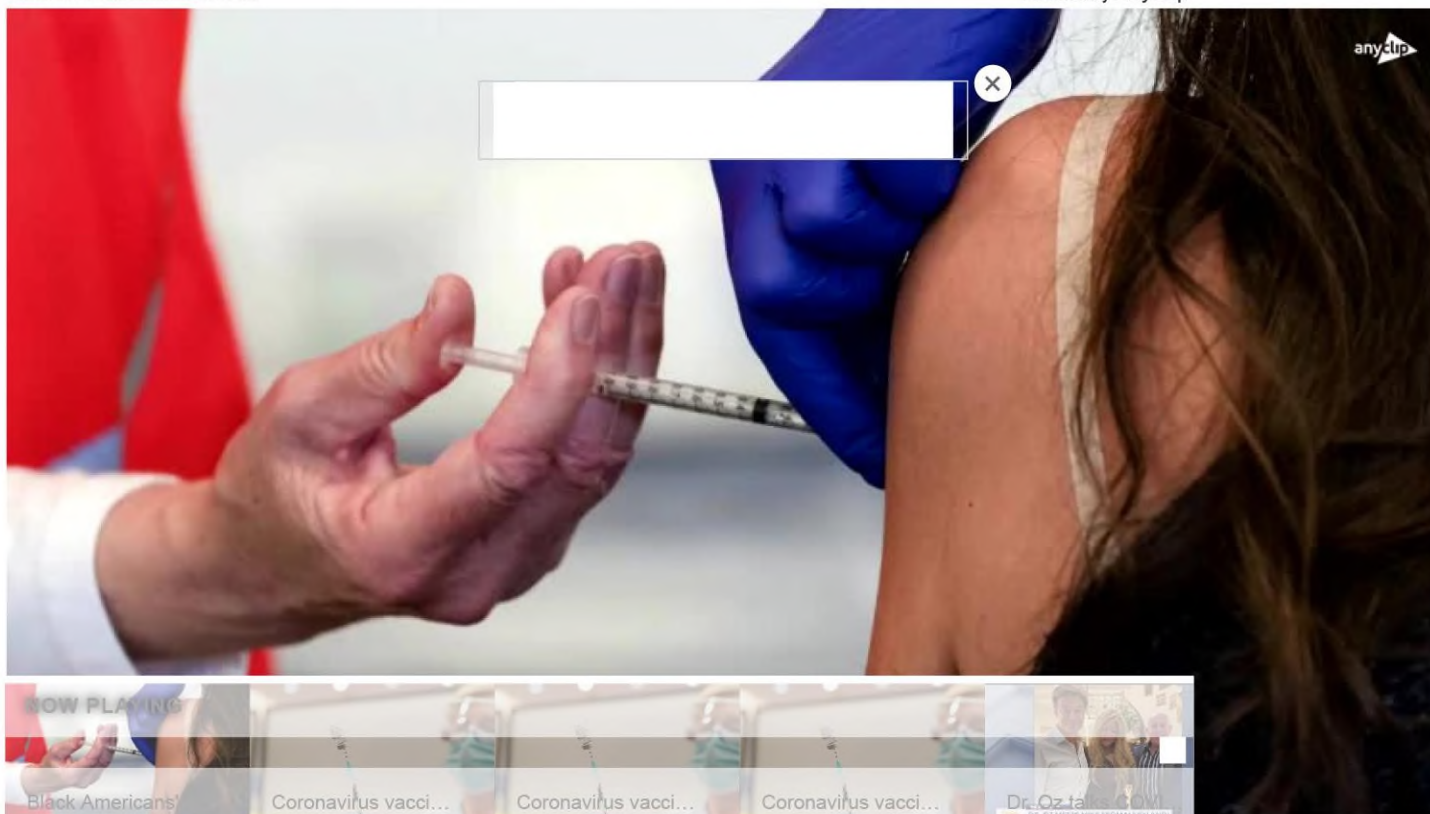
A migrant receives the AstraZeneca vaccine against the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) at a camp for refugees and migrants in Belgrade, Serbia, March 26, 2021. REUTERS/Marko Djurica  REUTERS

BELGRADE (REUTERS) - Serbia began vaccinating its migrant population on Friday to curb the coronavirus from spreading in refugee camps where social distancing is a challenge.

Currently around 6,000 migrants, mainly from the Middle East and central Asia, are in Serbia, mostly in 16 government-operated camps and cases of COVID-19 have been recorded.

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So far, enough of the AztraZeneca vaccine has been delivered to give 570 migrants their first dose.

"It is so good for us," Mohammad Rahib, an Afghan from Kabul, said after receiving his shot at the Krnjaca camp, just outside capital Belgrade.

Belgrade has secured a steady inflow of vaccines through deals with suppliers. According to official data, more than 2.1 million people in a country of 7 million have had at least one shot so far, with the rollout to migrants now also beginning.

"For this ... population, vaccination is very important because they are living in a collective centre and keeping a physical distance is very hard," said Abeyayehu Assefa Mengistu, a World Health Organization official in Serbia.

Francesca Bonelli, country representative of the UNHCR, the U.N. Refugee Agency, said: "It (vaccination) is an important sign of their inclusion into ... society."

Some 5,075 people have died from COVID-19 in Serbia.

(Reporting by Fedja Grulovic and Marko Djurica; Writing by Aleksandar Vasovic; Editing by Alison Williams)

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