

# Portugal emerges as Europe's vaccination frontrunner after public health drive

A former submarine commander has instilled confidence in job programme that had a faltering start



Vice-admiral Henrique Gouveia e Melo has become a popular figure in Portugal thanks to his role at the country's Covid vaccination task force. © Reuters/Chris Wedel/PT images

Peter Wise in Lisbon 5 HOURS AGO



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Henrique Gouveia e Melo, the former submarine commander who has become a quiet hero of Portugal's fight against Covid-19, could not stop his voice crackling with emotion when he was greeted by a prolonged ovation at a crowded vaccination centre.

"I couldn't help it," said the grey-bearded vice-admiral, who heads the country's vaccination task force, referring to the moment. "People were... saying to me 'we're with you'."

A week earlier, he won plaudits for his handling of an anti-vaccine protest, calmly telling angry demonstrators that "the real killer is the virus" as some in the placard-waving crowd shouted "murderer" at him.

Such protests have been rare in Portugal. An overwhelmingly positive response from the public to Gouveia e Melo is one of several factors that have made the country a frontrunner in the global race to vaccinate against Covid.

About 83 per cent of its population are already fully jabbed and 86 per cent have received at least one dose, which means it now has one of the highest vaccination rates in the world alongside the likes of the United Arab Emirates and Singapore.

## Portugal heads its EU peers in fully vaccinated residents



Source: Daily figures are estimates based on incomplete cumulative data. Source: Our World in Data, World Health Organization, national sources, FT research. © FT

Portugal leads a group of EU countries that have overtaken Israel and the UK in the vaccination stakes — where the double-jabbed rate stands at 61 per cent and 66 per cent respectively — despite the pair's strong early lead.

"What matters is vaccinating enough people to protect the whole group," Gouveia e Melo told a media briefing this month. "Being first, second or third in the world is not important."

He said he was confident that 86 per cent of Portugal's 10.3m residents would be fully vaccinated by the end of September.

This, he said, was the maximum level feasible, given that children under 12, people with certain medical conditions and vaccine-resistant — estimated to make up about 3 per cent of the population — will not receive jabs.

Health experts attribute Portugal's vaccination success to constructive co-operation between medics, the military and local officials. They also cite the public's memories of how vaccination was used successfully against measles, polio and other deadly diseases.

Pedro Simes, executive director of the Católica Biomedical Research Institute in Lisbon, believes the strong public adherence to the programme has its roots in Portugal's first national vaccination plan in 1965.

"It was tremendously successful and people have understood and trusted the benefits of vaccination ever since," he said.

Marta Tenido, health minister, said Portugal's national health service has always had a strong focus on primary care. "Our doctors and nurses have been at the heart of a strategy based around large-scale vaccination centres in which the support of the military and municipalities has been vital," she told the Financial Times.



About 83% of Portugal's population have been fully vaccinated and 86% have received at least one dose of Pfizer's two-dose Pfizer Comirnaty vaccine.

Gouveia e Melo, who was appointed to head the task force in January, has instilled confidence in a programme that began inauspiciously two months earlier amid allegations of queue-jumping, causing the previous leader, a hospital administrator, to resign.

"The vice-admiral's charisma, professionalism and trustworthiness have quickly turned him into one of the most popular and respected figures in the country," said Miguel Prudencio, a biochemist and researcher at Lisbon's Institute of Molecular Medicine (IMM), one of several scientific bodies working to inform the public on coronavirus issues.

Gouveia e Melo brought with him a team of about 30 military strategists, mathematicians and doctors to work with health ministry officials on co-ordinating a network of about 300 vaccination centres, many based in municipal sports stadiums. Run by about 5,000 doctors, nurses and volunteers, the system administered about 154,000 jabs a day at its peak.

Fear has also played its part. Portugal suffered one of the world's worst surges in cases in January and February, just as the vaccination programme was getting under way. The country was among the first EU countries to be hit by the more infectious Delta coronavirus variant.

"Striking images of ambulances lined up outside hospitals clearly made an impact," said the IMM's Prudencio.

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Keeping vaccination voluntary is seen as another important factor.

"In contrast to many other European countries, we have had no need to discuss vaccination mandates," said Ricardo Baptista-Leite, a doctor and health spokesman for the opposition Social Democrats. "The vast majority of people would second that the best solution currently available to control this disease is through vaccination."

In October, the focus will shift to vaccinating against flu. "We have won the first battle against coronavirus, but the war is not over," said Gouveia e Melo, whose fondness for wearing military fatigues is a constant reminder of his background. "We have to focus now on combating seasonal flu and determining whether Covid-19 booster shots will be needed."

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