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Headline: SoftBank leads \$93M investment in AI software startup

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(Bloomberg) -- SoftBank Group Corp. led a \$93 million investment in a startup that simplifies the process for companies to use machine learning or deep learning applications at scale.

Petuum Inc., based in Pittsburgh, makes artificial intelligence software that can be used by a variety of industries. For instance, Petuum's health-care software system uses electronic medical records to provide potential disease diagnosis and treatment recommendations. The startup also makes an operating system that allows customers to use artificial intelligence applications on hardware, including data centers.

The investment from a SoftBank subsidiary will be used to expand Petuum's team and further develop its operating system for specific industries, including manufacturing and health care, the company said Tuesday in a statement.

While all of the big technology companies, from Alphabet Inc.'s Google to Facebook Inc. and Amazon.com Inc. are racing to develop ways to use artificial intelligence, there are few examples outside that sphere of significant applications built at any meaningful scale, Petuum said. The company says it's created a flexible operating system that makes it easy for a broad range of users to build any type of machine learning or deep learning app at scale and deploy applications on a wide range of hardware.

"This technology should be standardized, accessible, and mass-producible, so that all can benefit from artificial intelligence, machine learning and deep learning," said Petuum founder and Chief Executive Officer Eric Xing. "We have surmounted many technical challenges as we work toward a standard and universal artificial intelligence platform."

SoftBank's Vision Fund also has made investments in cutting-edge technologies ranging from virtual reality to vertical farming. The fund led a \$114 million investment in a Brain Corp., a San Diego-based firm that specializes in developing self-driving technology for robots. The fund, which has attracted investment from Apple Inc., the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia, and other large institutional backers, is also scouting for possible investments in quantum computing.

Petuum's fundraising round included participation from private equity fund Advantech Capital. The startup, which was founded in July 2016, said it has now raised \$108 million to date. Its founders include Xing, an artificial intelligence professor and associate head of Carnegie Mellon University's Machine Learning department, as well as Qirong Ho, an adjunct assistant professor at the Singapore Management University School of Information Systems and Ning Li, a former advanced technology manager at Seagate Technology.

"We are firm believers in the value that artificial intelligence can bring to a broad range of industries," said Deep Nishar, a SoftBank managing director. "Petuum's work will finally help to unlock that value."