

## 'VACCINE MAITRI MAY HAVE TO WAIT TILL JULY'

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

A file photo of Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, left, receiving the first consignment of vaccines from India.-

India is unlikely to resume its Vaccine Maitri programme for the neighbourhood, including Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, until at least July, given the sudden shortage of vaccines amidst a surge in COVID-19 cases, and the government's plan for vaccination for all adults set to start on May 1.

India has had to suspend the export of both commercial and grant-based vaccine doses, including to countries in the neighbourhood which had already paid for the shipments, with the last batch going out at the beginning of April, after the second wave of the pandemic hit.

When asked on Thursday, Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla would not give a timeline for when the supplies will be restored. "Today, our needs are far greater, and all our partners understand that in this context, today what we require is to ramp up our vaccination programme, to 2-3 billion, so we have to ramp up significantly," he said.

However, at least two officials said South Block is aware of the problems this has created for India's neighbours. India's last shipment to Bangladesh was a grant of 1 lakh doses sent on April 2, while commercial shipments have not been sent since February 21, when 20 lakh doses were shipped, according to the Ministry of External Affairs website. Bangladesh had contracted for 30 million doses of Covishield at 5 million doses a month for six months, but only 7 million of the paid shipments actually arrived between January and February.

Sri Lanka placed a commercial order for 1.5 million (15 lakh) doses of Covishield, of which just 5 lakh doses have arrived so far. Sri Lanka and Nepal were last sent shipments through the COVAX alliance on March 6 and 28, respectively, while commercial shipments stopped at the end of February.

Sources said Bangladesh and Nepal have raised concerns about the interruption in supplies officially.

*(With inputs from*

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