

INDIA AT UN: 'SUPPLIED MORE VACCINES GLOBALLY THAN VACCINATED OUR OWN PEOPLE'

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India will not only be vaccinating 300 million of its own frontline workers over the next six months but in the process has also supplied vaccines to over 70 nations.

India has supplied more COVID-19 vaccines globally than vaccinated its own people, the country has told the UN General Assembly and cautioned that vaccine inequity will defeat the collective global resolve to contain the coronavirus as the disparity in the accessibility of vaccines will affect the poorest nations the most.

India was one of the initiators of the 'Political Declaration on Equitable Global Access to COVID-19 Vaccines' that garnered the support of more than 180 UN member states.

India's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador K. Nagaraj Naidu said at the General Assembly informal meeting on Friday that while the COVID-19 pandemic continues to persist, the year 2021 began on a positive note with the global scientific community coming up with multiple vaccines to contain the pandemic.

"While the vaccine challenge has been resolved, we are now confronted with ensuring the availability, accessibility, affordability, and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines. Lack of global cooperation and disparity in the accessibility of vaccines will affect the poorest nations the most," Naidu said.

India has been at the forefront of the global fight against COVID-19. Naidu told the General Assembly that India will not only be vaccinating 300 million of its own frontline workers over the next six months but in the process has also supplied vaccines to over 70 nations.

"In fact, as of today we have supplied more vaccines globally than have vaccinated our own people," Naidu said.

Two of India's vaccines, including the indigenously developed Covaxin, have already been granted emergency authorization, Naidu said, adding that 30 more vaccine candidates are at various phases of clinical trials.

The vaccine Covishield is the version of the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine produced by the Serum Institute of India. Covaxin is the indigenously developed vaccine by pharma company Bharat Biotech.

The Political Declaration states that equitable and affordable access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines must be ensured to have a speedy recovery and contribute to putting an end to the pandemic.

The declaration also expresses deep concern that despite international agreements and initiatives, the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines is still uneven worldwide, both among and within countries.

"Therefore, we express our deep concern that a considerable number of countries have not yet had access to COVID-19 vaccines, and stress the need for global solidarity and multilateral

cooperation to increase vaccine production and distribution, on regional and global levels."

Naidu said that as highlighted by the declaration equity in access to the vaccine is important for mitigating the impact of the pandemic.

"Vaccine inequity will defeat our collective resolve to contain the virus. The current disparity calls for solidarity and cooperation within the international frameworks such as COVAX," he said.

India, a significant source of supply to Gavi's COVAX facility, has contributed 20 million doses to the facility last month. India had also announced a gift of 200,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses for UN peacekeepers.

The shipment of vaccines for peacekeepers left Mumbai in the early hours of Saturday and will land in Denmark soon, Naidu said.

India also underlined the need to collaborate on genomic surveillance to track virus mutations and variants and exchange information in a timely fashion.

"Vaccine hesitancy should also be countered with science and public health infrastructure and capacities of health workers in vaccine delivery needs to be strengthened globally," he said.

Naidu highlighted the need for the international community to collectively work towards supporting initiatives that ensure speedy and equitable distribution of vaccines and therapeutics to the most disadvantaged populations.

"Affordability, access, and logistical issues should in no way become a hindrance in our fight against one of the biggest challenges facing humanity," he said.

Naidu added that India is working actively with GAVI, the World Health Organisation and ACT Accelerator.

"India and South-Africa have also called for WTO (World Trade Organisation) to suspend intellectual property rights related to COVID-19 for a limited period of time, to ensure rapid scaling-up of manufacturing of vaccines and ensuring accessibility and affordability of vaccines for all," he said.

He also stressed the importance of ensuring that ongoing global immunisation programmes pertaining to polio, diphtheria and other diseases do not get impacted as that will lead to the resurgence of other deadly diseases.

World Health Organisation chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has called for countries to work together so that all States could begin vaccinating within the first 100 days of 2021. He said 177 countries and economies have started vaccination and added that with just 15 days left before the 100 days are up, 36 countries are still waiting for vaccines so they can start inoculating health workers and older people.

President of the 75th session of the UN General Assembly Volkan Bozkir said at the meeting that the world, which went into the COVID-19 pandemic together, can emerge from it together as well.

"But that depends on fair and equitable access to vaccines. From the health worker in a small island developing state, to a teacher in a refugee camp, to the elderly in care facilities across our countries, we must all be covered," Bozkir said.

He stressed that the most vulnerable groups – people on the move, in conflict zones, and those already marginalised – must be prioritised.

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