

India suspends export of COVID-19 vaccines

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India's right-wing authoritarian Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has suspended exports of COVID-19 vaccines for at least two months. This decision will severely impact vaccination programs in lower- and middle-income countries in Africa, Latin America and the rest of Asia, contributing to the further spread of the pandemic, including the new more contagious and lethal variants.

The BJP government has yet to issue an official statement announcing that it is suspending COVID-19 vaccine exports. However, Indian and international media have quoted "government sources" justifying the decision by pointing to increasing domestic requirements under conditions of a dramatic rise of infections within India in recent weeks.

An official source quoted by the Chennai-based daily the *Hindu* said last Wednesday night, "Given our current manufacturing capacity and requirements of national vaccination programmes, there may be a need to calibrate the supply schedules from time to time. All stakeholders would have to work together to adjust the schedules as required."

In an attempt to downplay the implications of the government's decision, he claimed that India—the world's leading exporter of generic medicines—remains "committed" to providing vaccine supplies to the world. He said that "unlike many other countries," the Indian government has not placed an official ban on vaccine exports, but the policy he and other officials went on to outline is a ban in all but name.

According to the officials, exports will now take place in a phased manner, "keeping in view the domestic requirements." Moreover, while all pending orders will ultimately be delivered, new orders will not be accepted for several months.

However the Narendra Modi-led BJP government chooses to justify its decision and downplay its impact, the reality is its suspension of vaccine exports is bound up with the reactionary nationalist calculations of India's ruling elite. It is the Indian version of the "vaccine nationalism" pursued by governments in the US and Europe, which have subordinated the production and distribution of vaccines to the drive for profit and the geopolitical interests of the various competing ruling elites.

The US has hoarded vaccines, insisting that they must be allocated to the American population before being supplied to other countries. The distribution of vaccines has become yet another tool at Washington's disposal to bully and intimidate other countries into following US interests. For example, the

US has made the supply of vaccines to neighboring Mexico conditional on the Mexican government's willingness to use savage repression to block migrants trying to cross the Mexico-US border.

At the same time, the US, Canada and EU have vehemently opposed requests made by several lower-income countries for the lifting of patents so that the vaccines can be produced in developing countries. In this way, the Western imperialist powers have shown that they have more concern for the profits of their pharmaceutical giants than they do for the lives of millions of people across the world. This refusal to provide vaccines to the vast majority of the world's population, even as the pandemic surges due to the spread of more infectious variants, has now been compounded by the Modi government's move to block exports.

The Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, which runs the COVAX programme, a UN-backed effort to provide vaccines to poor countries, said that Indian vaccine supplies to lower income countries are being delayed "as the government of India battles a new wave of COVID-19 infections." Although Gavi has received 28 million doses of Covishield from the Serum Institute of India (SII), it said that it was unclear whether additional supplies of 40 million doses in March and 50 million in April will be provided. The SII is manufacturing the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine under the name of Covishield under a license from its original British-Swedish manufacturer AstraZeneca.

An email sent by UNICEF to Reuters noted, "We understand that deliveries of COVID-19 vaccines to lower-income economies participating in the COVAX Facility will likely face delays following a setback in securing export licenses for further doses of COVID-19 vaccines produced by the Serum Institute of India (SII), expected to be shipped in March and April."

The Modi government's decision has also affected the vaccination program in the UK, since part of AstraZeneca's licensing agreement required India to supply Britain with doses. Last week, the National Health Service (NHS) sent a written warning to hospitals about an impending shortage of the vaccine due to a "four-week delay" of about half of the orders it expected from the SII.

According to Adar Poonawalla, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the SII, five million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine

were already delivered by his institution to the UK early this month. However, future supplies will be affected by the decision of the Modi government. He told Britain's *Daily Telegraph*, "It is solely dependent on India, and it has nothing to do with the SII. It is to do with the Indian government allowing more doses to the UK."

India has exported more than 60 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines since last January, according to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. However, only a small fraction of them, just eight million, were grants from the Indian government. The bulk of the doses, some 34.17 million, were part of commercial orders, and another 17.86 million were procured by the international Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance.

An Indian government source quoted by the *Hindu* noted that the country has already exported the vaccine to 75 countries worldwide. "No other country has supplied the world with as many doses as India has so far," he added.

Whatever the Modi government's claims, its policies are not driven by humanitarian concerns about the impact of the pandemic on the lives of the population internationally and in India. On the contrary, through its supply of the vaccines to lower-income and middle-income countries, New Delhi seeks to boost its geostrategic influence against its rivals, above all China, which is also exporting its own COVID-19 vaccines.

During the recent leadership summit of the Quad, a US-led "security dialogue" including India, Japan and Australia, a proposal was discussed to produce COVID-19 vaccines in India with the financial support of the US and Japan. The plan called for these vaccines to then be sent to poor countries throughout the world with the assistance of Australia, in an attempt to counter what the Quad more than cynically described as China's "vaccine diplomacy."

The Modi government's suspension of the export of COVID-19 vaccines is also a desperate response to the current resurgence of the pandemic throughout India, i.e., the ruinous outcome of its own disastrous policies.

The country recorded 68,020 new COVID-19 cases on Monday, the highest number of new daily infections since October. The total number of coronavirus cases has now surpassed 12 million, with the death toll over 161,800, even according to the highly underreported official figures.

This resurgence of COVID-19 is in all likelihood being driven by the emergence of new variants of the virus, which are more infectious and may cause vaccines to be less effective. Last week, authorities reported that they had identified a "double mutant" of the virus, i.e., one that combines two variants.

"This double mutant could be a major reason behind the upsurge in COVID cases, but we need to wait for test results to determine if it is the case," M.C. Mishra, a former top official at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, told the German broadcaster Deutsche Welle.

From the very beginning, the government's response to the

pandemic has focused on placing corporate profits ahead of the lives of workers and the poor.

Having refused to take any substantial measures to contain the pandemic during several critical months at the beginning of 2020, the government suddenly made an about-face and imposed a national lockdown in late March.

However, due to the ill-prepared character of the lockdown—including the government's failure to provide social support combined with mass testing, contact tracing and the allocation of substantial financial resources to upgrade the ramshackle public health care system—Modi's lockdown failed to achieve its declared aims.

Starting from late April, the government worked to reopen the economy, systematically lifting coronavirus-related restrictions to allow industries to operate under dangerous conditions as the virus surged.

The Modi government's decision to suspend the export of vaccines is bound up with its insistence that no more substantive lockdowns should be implemented, in spite of the rapid spread of the virus. By promoting vaccination as the sole solution to the pandemic, the government is doubling down on its push to keep the economy open at all costs.

Even if one grants that the government desires to curb the pandemic in India, its reactionary nationalist decision to suspend vaccine exports is self-defeating. The pandemic is a global crisis that requires a global solution. COVID-19 does not respect national borders and will continue to pose a threat to every country as it spreads internationally.

The failure to vaccinate large numbers of people in the majority of the world's countries only creates the conditions for the virus to spread more widely, giving it the chance to mutate and possibly become resistant to the very vaccines the Indian government is now relying on to ultimately bring the pandemic under control within its national borders.



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