

**ALJAZEERA**

News | Coronavirus pandemic

India, 'pharmacy of the world', starts exporting COVID vaccines

First shipment sent to Bhutan as 'supplies under grant assistance' to be exported to other neighbouring nations.



A nurse displays a vial of AstraZeneca's Covishield vaccine during a vaccination campaign in Mumbai [Francis Mascarenhas/Reuters]

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India has started exporting coronavirus vaccines with a shipment to the neighbouring Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said, as the so-called “pharmacy of the world” looks to bolster its vaccine diplomacy.

Many low and middle-income countries are relying on India, the world's biggest vaccine maker, for supplies to start COVID-19 immunisation programmes and bring an end to their outbreaks.

"First consignment takes off for Bhutan!" MEA spokesman Anurag Srivastava said on Twitter on Wednesday. "India begins supply of Covid vaccines to its neighbouring and key partner countries."

The ministry said on Tuesday "supplies under grant assistance" would be shipped to the Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar and Seychelles, while Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Mauritius await regulatory clearances to receive the vaccines.

"The Pharmacy of the World will deliver to overcome the COVID challenge," Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar posted on Twitter, referring to the exports.

Indian firms produce about half of the world's vaccine supply, mostly for developing nations, according to the Indian Pharmaceutical Alliance.

India will also provide training for personnel involved in the vaccine roll-out in all the neighbouring countries.

India authorised two vaccines this month for emergency use at home, one licensed from Oxford University and AstraZeneca and another developed at home by Bharat Biotech in partnership with the state-run Indian Council of Medical Research. Both are manufactured locally.

However, Bharat Biotech on Tuesday warned people with weak immunity and other medical conditions including allergies, fever or a bleeding disorder to consult a doctor before getting the shot – and if possible avoid the vaccine.

The company said those receiving vaccinations should disclose their medical condition, medicines they are taking and any history of allergies. It said severe allergic reactions among vaccine recipients may include difficulty breathing, swelling of the face and throat, rapid heartbeat, body rashes, dizziness and weakness.

The Bharat Biotech vaccine, called Covaxin, ran into controversy after the Indian government allowed its use without concrete data showing its effectiveness in preventing COVID-19.

At least two other vaccines are expected to be authorised by India in the next few months.

India will initially ship only the AstraZeneca vaccine, made by the Serum Institute of India, the world's biggest vaccine maker, which brands the shot as Covishield.

Bangladesh said it expected to receive a gift of two million doses of Covishield on Thursday. The country of more than 160 million has yet to start its vaccination programme and has ordered a further 30 million doses of the shot.

India, which has reported the highest number of coronavirus infections after the United States, has vaccinated more than 631,417 front-line workers after the nationwide drive began on Saturday.

The world's second-most populous country on Wednesday reported 13,823 new cases, taking the total to 10.9 million. The number of deaths from the disease rose by 162 to 152,718, data from the health ministry showed.