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Coronavirus: in India, the drug industry under high tension

After halting the exports of several molecules, including paracetamol and hydroxychloroquine, the Modi government has reopened the borders.

By Guillaume Delacroix • Posted on April 11, 2020 at 11:04 a.m. - Updated on April 13, 2020 at 6:16 a.m.

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Customers wait their turn to buy drugs in a pharmacy on March 28 in Amritsar (India).
NARINDER NANU / AFP

European and American health professionals breathed a sigh of relief on Tuesday, April 7. A month after freezing exports of 13 drugs and drug compounds manufactured on its territory, India has finally decided to reopen its borders, under pressure from the countries most affected by the pandemic due to the new coronavirus, many of which fear a sold out.

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On March 3, while the contaminations were still counted only on the fingers of one hand in the subcontinent, the Modi government had suspended, as a precaution, sales of paracetamol, vitamins B1, B6 and B12, antivirals (aciclovir) and antibiotics as an active ingredient or as a finished product (tinidazole, metronidazole, ornidazole, chloramphenicol, neomycin, erythromycin and clindamycin).

"At the time, Indian manufacturers were worried about the uncertainties hanging over their supply of components of Chinese origin," explains Sudarshan Jain, secretary general of the Indian Pharmaceutical Alliance (IPA), a professional federation of Indian players in the sector. .

India, often nicknamed "the pharmacy of the world", is extremely dependent on China: 70% of the active ingredients used by its pharmaceutical factories are manufactured in the country where the

epidemic started in December 2019. And, to top it off bad luck, mainly in Hubei province, epicenter of Covid-19.

Largest producer of hydroxychloroquine

To remedy this dependence, the Modi government announced on March 22 the mobilization of 100 billion rupees (1.2 billion euros) to set up a fund intended to encourage, over the next eight years, Indian manufacturers to produce their active ingredients themselves.

On March 25, Delhi extended the list of products banned from exporting, but for another reason: in this case, speculation on hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine, whose effectiveness in treating Covid-19 has not yet demonstrated. India has stopped the sale abroad of these molecules, one used in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis, the other in the treatment of malaria. The subcontinent is the world's largest producer of hydroxychloroquine (70% market share).

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This molecule has been the subject of a serious standoff between the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and Donald Trump. On Sunday April 5, the American president asked India to renounce the embargo on this molecule and brandished the threat of reprisals. He obtained satisfaction: on Friday, sales of hydroxychloroquine and paracetamol resumed to 13 countries, the United States for the most part, but also Brazil, Germany, Spain, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Afghanistan, Bahrain, Mauritius, Seychelles and the Dominican Republic.

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