India's central government will take over vaccinations amid criticism over its handling of the outbreak.

Amid criticism of the government's handling of one of the world's deadliest outbreaks, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India said on Monday that the federal government would play a bigger role procuring Covid-19 vaccines on behalf of states. It's a process that had been mired in confusion because of squabbling between the central and state governments and a lack of vaccine supply.

Mr. Modi said in a nationwide address that his government would increase both the pace of inoculations and the purchasing of vaccines. Less than 4 percent of the country's 1.4 billion people have been fully vaccinated, according to a New York Times database.

"The government of India will procure 75 percent stock from vaccine manufacturers and provide it to states," he said. "That means, no state governments will have to spend anything on vaccines."

Many Indian states had earlier vowed to vaccinate their populations for free, particularly those ruled by parties in opposition to Mr. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, but they were forced to close vaccination centers after they ran out of supplies. Mr. Modi also announced free inoculations for all Indians above the age of 18, a policy that was earlier reserved for frontline workers and people older than 45. The prime minister and his government have come under heavy criticism over their handling of the pandemic. Mr. Modi and members of his party appeared at political rallies and allowed mass gatherings to take place before the country experienced a devastating second wave. Mr. Modi has kept a relatively low profile since his political rallies in April, in contrast with his frequent live addresses during the first wave of the pandemic last year, when he announced a nationwide lockdown four hours before it took effect.

Last week, the country's top court asked the government to explain how it planned to achieve its own target of inoculating about 900 million adults by the end of the year. It also called out the government for allowing private health facilities to charge people under 45 for vaccinations, calling the policy "arbitrary and irrational." Mr. Modi said in his address that private hospitals will still be allowed to procure 25 percent stock of the vaccines. State governments were required to ensure that only 150 rupees, or a little more than $2, could be levied as a "service charge" on top of the usual price, he said.

On Monday, India's health ministry reported more than 100,000 new cases and 2,427 deaths. Although the numbers are high, they represent sharp declines from May, when the country was reporting more than 400,000 cases a day. India's official numbers are believed to be a vast undercount, especially as the virus is spreading to rural areas where testing is limited.

Mr. Modi also extended the government's assistance program for poor households, announcing free monthly food distributions to over 800 million households until November. "The aim of this effort is to make sure no countrymen or their families are forced to go to bed hungry," he said.

Nytimes

Kick-starting a new strategic and defence partnership with Bangladesh

Australia's 2020 defence strategic update identifies the northeast Indian Ocean as a priority area as part of our immediate region, but it's also where our security relationships are the least developed. A new report published by the National Security College examines Australia's interests in that region and options for enhanced security relations with Bangladesh.

For at least a decade, Australia has rightly concentrated on India as its key South Asian partner, but it is now time to broaden that strategy to include other countries in that region. Enhanced security, political and economic relations with Bangladesh should be part of that. Despite being one of the first countries to recognise an independent Bangladesh, Australia has not properly developed the relationship.

Improved connections with Bangladesh would also be part of a developing web of relationships with existing and emerging middle powers across the Indo-Pacific. These can supplement relationships with major powers and, potentially, also help mitigate some of the impacts of major power competition.

Australia has significant strategic equities in Bangladesh, reflecting economic opportunities and potential threats emanating from the northeast Indian Ocean.

Bangladesh is one of the big economic success stories in Asia. Over the past several decades, Bangladesh has grown from one of the poorest countries in the world to a middle-income country. In the years prior to the Covid-19 crisis, its economic growth averaged around 7% to 8% per annum. It could well become one of Asia's new economic 'tigers' and a key trading partner for Australia.

It's in our interests to support a stable and independent Bangladesh as it pursues development while balancing external pressures. Bangladesh is located at the fulcrum of the Bay of Bengal, between India and China, and is the subject of growing strategic competition between them. Recent threats by the Chinese ambassador if Bangladesh dared to develop relations with the Quad will likely be shrugged off by Dhaka. Indeed, such bullying may only further highlight the value for Dhaka of building partnerships with countries like Australia and Japan that can add further ballast to Bangladesh's regional relationships.

Australia also has other security interests in the region, including in managing risks of climate change, people and drug smuggling and violent extremism, all of which could have a significant impact on Australia.

The ethnic cleansing of Rohingya people from Myanmar has resulted in more than 1 million refugees in Bangladeshi camps, creating risks from unregulated population movements and violent extremism.

Climate change, including sea-level rise and severe weather events, may also have a major impact on Bangladesh in coming years, potentially triggering large-scale population movements and regional instability.

Extended civil unrest in Myanmar also creates risks of a surge in drug smuggling or refugee movements. Myanmar is already Australia's largest source of opium and now methamphetamines, and a breakdown in order could flood those drugs onto the Australian market.

Australia may increasingly need Bangladesh as a regional partner to help address these threats. But our security relationship is very thin. Official military visits are rare and there is no resident defence representative. But Bangladesh has recently flagged its interest in developing closer security relations as part of a more comprehensive relationship with Australia.

Much can be done to kick-start engagement at minimal cost. Australia can start by focusing on low-hanging fruit, building relationships between the defence forces, building Bangladesh's maritime security capabilities in selected areas and seeking opportunities for collaborative regional engagement.

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'Misunderstandings' with India resolved, will pursue positive relationship: Nepal PM Oli

Nepal's embattled Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli has said that "misunderstandings" with India have been resolved and that the two countries should move forward looking at the future, asserting that neighbours share both love and problems.

In a recent interview to BBC Hindi Service, Oli accepted the fact that once, there were misunderstandings between the two neighbours. However, he did not elaborate on those issues.

Oli, in a televised address to the nation last month, said that the outstanding issues relating to the border issue with India will be resolved through diplomatic channels on the basis of historical accords, maps and factual documents.

He told BBC: "Yes, there were misunderstandings at one time, but now those misunderstandings are gone. We should not be stuck in past misunderstandings but move forward looking at the future".

"We have to pursue a positive relationship," the 69-year-old Nepal prime minister, now heading a minority government, said.

Nepal's opposition alliance has approached the Supreme Court against the "unconstitutional" move of President Bidya Devi Bhandari to dissolve the House of Representatives and fresh elections on the recommendation of Prime Minister Oli.

Nepal has a unique relationship with India, unlike with any other country, Oli said.

"Neighbours share both love and problems. Don't people in Chile or Argentina have a problem?" he asked.

Ties between India and Nepal came under severe strain after Nepal last year published the new political map that showed three Indian territories - Limpiyadhura, Kalapani and Lipulekh - as part of Nepal.

After Nepal released the map, India reacted sharply, calling it a "unilateral act" and cautioning Kathmandu that such "artificial enlargement" of territorial claims will not be acceptable to it.

India said that Nepal's action violated an understanding reached between the two countries to resolve the boundary issues through talks.

The bilateral exchanges that had stalled due to the bitter boundary dispute were reset in the later part of 2020 with a series of high-level visits, as New Delhi emphasised that it sees itself as the Himalayan nation's "foremost friend" and development partner.

Then Nepalese foreign minister Pradeep Kumar Gyawali visited New Delhi in January this year and held wide-ranging talks with external affairs minister S Jaishankar covering the entire expanse of bilateral ties. Gyawali said both the countries have a common commitment to resolve the issue.

"We have the common commitment to resolve it. The sanctity and security of the border is extremely important for expanding the overall developmental cooperation... We both have realised the urgency (to resolve the border issue)," he had said.

Gyawali was the senior-most political leader from Nepal to visit India after relations nosedived following the boundary row.

On the issue of Covid-19 pandemic, Prime Minister Oli said that India should help in a different way than other countries in controlling and ending the spread of the contagion.

Nepal and India have open borders, he said, adding that India should pay special attention to help Nepal in some places.

Oli said that if the Covid-19 pandemic is controlled in India and not in Nepal, it would have no meaning as the virus would ultimately spread.

He thanked India for providing the vaccine for the first time and other healthcare supplies, but regretted that Nepal did not get as much help as it needed from India.

There were high expectations from India, he said, adding that he would like to make a request to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"In view of these times and our friendly relations, India should extend full cooperation to Nepal. That doesn't mean I haven't got help from India. At this time, Nepal needs vaccinations, for which Nepal will and is urging both its neighbours and all countries."

"Whoever provides us vaccines, be it India, China, the US or the UK, it is fine to receive vaccines. It is not necessary to politicise it and we thank both our neighbours very much," Oli said.

"On one hand China has given us 1.8 million (18 lakh) vaccines and on the other India has given 2.1 million (21 lakh) vaccines. We have the help of both. We are also getting medical equipment from both. So, thank you both," the Prime Minister added.

Nepal's Covid-19 caseload crossed the six-lakh mark on Sunday as 3,479 more people were infected with the virus.

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Bangladesh extends lockdown, tightens restrictions

DHAKA: The Bangladesh government has extended the nationwide lockdown for 10 more days and adopted stricter restrictions to control the furthr spread of Covid-19.

The lockdown, which ended early Monday after having been extended several times, will now run through the midnight of June 16, reports Xinhua news agency.

The country's Cabinet Division in its latest order urged the authorities concerned to take necessary steps so that tourist spots, resorts and communities remain closed during the period.

The latest lockdown restrictions came amid a surging Covid-19 positivity rate in several districts bordering India.

To combat Covid-19, Bangladesh declared a seven-day lockdown effective from April 5, which was later extended with strict measures in phases to May 30, and extended again till June 6.

On Monday, the country's Directorate General of Health Services reported 1,970 new cases of and 30 fatalities, bringing the number of total infections to 812,960 and the death toll to 12,869.

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Uzbekistan cement imports surge in 4M21

Uzbekistan imported 1Mt of cement worth US$50.5m in the January-April 2021 period, more than doubling the year-ago volume of 515,100t, according to Trend reporting the latest data from the State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan.

Kazakstan was the largest importer with 498,900t of cement, followed by Kyrgyzstan (278,500t) and Tajikistan (234,700t).

In March, the Uzbekistan government suspended the 30 per cent customs duty on cement imports until 1 October 2021. The suspension is expected to prevent the rise in building materials prices, particularly in view of the significant growth in construction expected in the coming months.

State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan had earlier reported that Uzbek cement companies had produced 2.2Mta in the first quarter of 2021 with producers in the Navoi region accounted for the largest share of this total – 41 per cent. Cement companies in the Tashkent and Fergana regions accounted for 40.5 and 9.6 per cent, respectively.