India plans to more than triple COVID-19 vaccine shots per day

India could have as many as 10 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines available per day in July and August, compared with just under three million now, the government said, trying to allay concerns about shortages and mishandling of the programme.

The world's second most populous country has suffered a disastrous outbreak of infections since April that is only now abating and health experts say the only way it can avert another surge is mass vaccination of its 1.3 billion people.

"We don't doubt that we will be able to increase the pace of vaccinations, once supply is ramped up," government advisor V K Paul told reporters on Tuesday.

Vaccine manufacturers such as Serum Institute of India and Bharat Biotech are scrambling to boost supplies, with the country is also in talks with major foreign vaccine producers such as Pfizer Inc (PFE.N), officials have said. read more

The health ministry said nearly 45 million people had been fully vaccinated - 4.7% of the country's 950 million adult population. India administered nearly 2.8 million doses on Monday, according to data from its official vaccine portal.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has drawn criticism for a slow vaccine rollout even though India is one of the world's biggest manufacturers of doses, including AstraZeneca's shot.

Several states have complained of a shortage of the AstraZeneca vaccines and another called Covaxin, developed by Indian firm Bharat Biotech.

Last month, the government ordered that the interval between two doses of AstraZeneca be increased to 12-16 weeks from 4-6 weeks, which experts said was because of tight supplies.

Paul said there was no plan to mix doses of different vaccines that some officials had suggested earlier. He also said everyone was recommended to take the full two doses of AstraZeneca's vaccine and not limit themselves to one shot.

"India's Covishield schedule is of two doses... there is no change, and Covaxin is also for two doses," Paul said.

On Tuesday the country reported its lowest daily rise in new coronavirus infections in over a month, at 127,510, while deaths rose by 2,795 - its lowest daily increase since April 27.

"Containment has worked. However, it is not a sustainable solution and we have to find a measure to ease the lockdowns," said Balram Bhargava, head of the Indian Council of Medical Research.

The giant South Asian nation's overall toll of infections now stands at 28.2 million, while the number of deaths has reached 331,895, according to health ministry data.

The Last Frontier: Energy investments in Uzbekistan reach new heights

A recent deal stands out because it is the first fully privately financed project in the Uzbek energy sector and also the largest EU private sector investment in Uzbekistan, writes Alberto Turkstra.

The recent announcement of a $1.2 billion deal between Uzbekistan's Ministry of Energy and Dutch-registered company Stone City Energy for the construction of a Thermal Power Plant (TPP) in the Surkhandarya Region in South-East Uzbekistan, is significant in many ways.

Stone City Energy will be responsible for designing, financing, building, commissioning, operating and managing the 1,560 MW power plant for a period of 25 years and employ the latest technologies manufactured by Siemens Energy. This power plant will increase the stability, reliability and robustness of the national grid and create over 2,000 jobs. This deal stands is an important milestone for the foreign investment community and living proof of the economic opening in Uzbekistan and the resulting stable and reliable investment climate, with energy as one of the most attractive sectors.

Statistics speak for themselves: Uzbekistan is radically climbing up in the statistical indexes on investment climate.

From being ranked 87th in 2016 in the World Bank's Doing Business Report, Uzbekistan has improved to position 69th by 2020, ranking particularly well in subcategories such as "starting a business", "protecting minority investors", and "contract enforcement" – all areas that investors carefully look at before deciding to enter a market, in addition to political stability and strong rule of law.

Uzbekistan is the largest electricity producer in Central Asia – with total installed capacity exceeding 12 GW – and energy consumption is expected to double in the next decade, requiring $26 billion in investments and an additional 17 GW of generation capacity to meet this goal.

However, the electricity generation infrastructure is ageing and inefficient and almost exclusively based on natural gas. The ageing power grid results in high transmission and distribution losses. Uzbekistan is one of the most energy-intensive economies, as measured by energy intensity per unit of GDP. The average efficiency of thermal power plants is in the range of 28 – 33%. A significant part of the distribution lines and power plants was built during the Soviet era, and these are now in urgent need of upgrading and replacement. In this context, the Uzbek government has, since 2019, implemented a large-scale transformation and liberalization of its energy sector with the overarching objectives being the dismantling of monopolistic practices, creating a conducive environment for private sector participation and a more favourable regulatory framework for foreign investors. One of the key institutional innovations worth highlighting in the overhaul of the energy sector is the development of the country's first Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Law, including the setting up of a dedicated PPP agency. In 2019, the IFC assisted the Government of Uzbekistan to structure and implement the first-ever PPP project in the energy sector. The project was awarded to UAE-based Masdar Clean Energy for the construction of a photovoltaic (PV) farm near Navoi City. In 2019, the Uzbek government furthermore decided on the unbundling of Uzbekenergo, the state-owned power utility providing electricity for Uzbekistan with a legally endowed monopoly in charge of electricity generation, transmission, and distribution. Uzbekenergo had struggled to meet the fast-growing power demands and in 2017 made losses worth USD 840 million (absorbed by the government). In the framework of the restructuring of the energy sector, in 2019 the Ministry of Energy was formed to "develop and implement a single state policy in the Oil & Gas and Power industry aimed to ensure the country's energy security".

The establishment of an independent energy regulator (in charge of electricity and natural gas) is also expected in the near future, which will be subordinate to the President and the Parliament. To this end, several frameworks, decrees and strategies have been implemented including (1) Strategy for the Transition to a Green Economy for the 2019-2030 Period, (2) The concept note for the supply of electric power 2020-2030, (3) A Low-Carbon Road Map for the Power Sector in the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2050, developed with the support of the EBRD and the Government of Japan exploring the feasibility of a carbon neutral electricity generation sector in Uzbekistan by 2050.

Pakistani intelligence accused of torture in crackdown on dissent

Walking to the barber's one evening, Shafiq Ahmed began to suspect he was being followed. The 37-year-old lawyer and social media activist in Pakistan worried he was about to be abducted.

A few seconds later, a group of men grabbed him and forced him into the backseat of a waiting car.

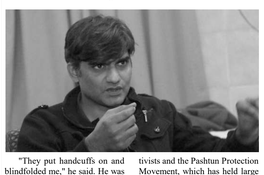
The kidnapping in December 2019, in the eastern city of Okara, was captured on CCTV. Mr Ahmed can be seen desperately trying to fight back, while his attackers appear to threaten bystanders against intervening.

After Mr Ahmed was bundled in the car, no-one would hear from him for weeks.

He believes that the men who abducted him worked for Pakistan's intelligence services. Mr Ahmed was a forthright critic of the government led by Prime Minister Imran Khan, as well as of the country's powerful military, which many allege plays a controlling role in politics from behind the scenes.

Mr Ahmed's disappearance and torture appear to be part of a wider crackdown in the country on dissenting voices, designed to suppress allegations that Pakistan's military is interfering in the political system and helped manipulate the 2018 elections in Mr Khan's favour - allegations the military and Mr Khan deny.

Speaking from the hospital room where he was recovering, Mr Ahmed told the BBC what happened after he disappeared from the frame on the CCTV footage.



"They put handcuffs on and blindfolded me," he said. He was then taken to an unknown location. "They dragged me out of the car and threw me into a room and started torturing me. They didn't ask me anything, they just stripped me naked … and began beating me continuously with leather belts and wooden sticks, on my back and the soles of my feet." The beatings lasted for five to six days in small, windowless cell, Mr Ahmed said. He didn't think he would survive. "They told me, 'We will throw your body into the river.'" Video filmed by Mr Ahmed of his injuries after his release shows extensive bruising on his body.

Since then, the crackdown appears to have only intensified. Last week, a journalist was tied up and beaten at gunpoint by men identifying themselves as members of Pakistan's intelligence service, the ISI. In April, a commentator was shot and injured while walking in a park. Pakistan is currently ranked 145 out of 180 countries on a Press Freedom Index compiled by the charity Reporter's Without Borders. Neither the army nor the government responded to requests to comment from the BBC about allegations intelligence officers have targeted journalists and activists although the ISI has publicly denied involvement in last week's assault.

According to Mr Ahmed, during his interrogation the men holding him asked: "Who is really behind the posts you put up on Facebook and Twitter?"

"I told them, 'No-one is telling me to write them. I have my own independent beliefs about the importance of civilian rule.' But they weren't prepared to listen to me."

image captionThe kidnappers read out statuses Mr Ahmed had posted that were critical of Prime Minister Imran Khan

He said he was also asked about who was "funding" him; and what his links were to other liberal activists and the Pashtun Protection Movement, which has held large demonstrations accusing the military of human rights abuses. It sounded to Mr Ahmed like his interrogators had printed copies of his social media posts. "I was blindfolded, but could hear pages turning as they said, 'What have you written here about the military spokesman? You've said this or that about the army chief and Prime Minister - why are you criticising them?'" **Reuters**

Tajikistan to receive 300,000 doses of China's CoronaVac vaccine

Tajikistan reached agreement with China on humanitarian delivery of CoronaVac vaccine, Chief of Sanitary and Epidemiological Safety Department Navruz Jafarov told Khovar news agency.

300,000 doses will be delivered, which will be enough for vaccination of 150,000 people.

"Technical issues, terms of transportation and delivery of CoronaVac to Tajikistan are negotiated now," Navruz Jafarov said.

Over 80,000 were vaccinated against COVID-19 in Tajikistan since March 23. The country is using AstraZeneca vaccine for vaccination. **AKIPRESS**

Threat of legal action chills journalism in Bangladesh, analysts say

SRINAGAR, INDIA - Bangladesh's Digital Security Act is hastening the country's decline in press freedom, with authorities using the legislation to jail journalists and others who are critical of the government and its response to the coronavirus pandemic, local media and analysts say.

In 2020 alone, the law was used to charge around 900 people, including several journalists, according to Amnesty International.

Bangladesh's information minister, Hasan Mahmud, has said in interviews that the act is needed to protect people online. But rights groups and local journalist associations say the Digital Security Act and other laws, including the Official Secrets Act that was used to detain an investigative reporter in May, are adding to pressures for journalism.

Activists shout slogans during a protest against the Digital Security Act (DSA), in Dhaka on March 3, 2021, following the death…

Kamal Ahmed, a Dhaka-based freelance journalist, said that even before the widely criticized law was passed in 2018, the country was on a downhill trajectory.

The space for critical journalism has been shrinking along with a distrust in the election process, following a 2013 vote boycotted by the opposition, Ahmed said. The government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has become more authoritarian and intolerant to criticism, which is driving the persecution of the voices of dissent and criticism, he added.

According to media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Hasina's government has "taken a markedly tough line with media." RSF cited the Digital Security Act and prosecutions related to pandemic coverage when it ranked Bangladesh 152 out of 180, where 1 is freest, on its annual press freedom index.

The Center for Governance Studies, an independent Bangladeshi research group, says the Digital Security Act has been used most against opposition politicians, followed closely by journalists.

In an April report, the organization concluded that the law has "disproportionately impacted the journalists" and is an obstacle to press freedom. Its data found "that activists and supporters of the ruling party have been able to create a frightening situation using the law."

Bangladesh's Sampadak Parishad, or Editors' Council, was one of the groups that opposed the law from the start. "Our fear is now a nightmare-reality for the mass media," the council said after arrests of Ahmed Kabir Kishore, a cartoonist, and Mushtaq Ahmed, a writer, in May 2020.

Mushtaq Ahmed was denied bail several times and died in prison on February 25.

His death and the ramping up of prosecutions is leading to calls for the law to be reformed and press freedom to be better protected.

During the pandemic, dozens of journalists who covered corruption or reported on cases of food aid being taken from poorer regions, were hit with legal complaints, said Saleem Samad, an award-winning Dhaka-based journalist. "Those who dared critiquing of the pandemic health care management were also prosecuted under repressive [Digital Security Act]," Samad said.

The act has resulted in widespread self-censorship, especially among the newsroom gatekeepers, Samad said, adding that in-depth stories on corruption and accountability of elected representatives or lawmakers are missing in the media.

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