India's Covid vaccine rollout hit by hesitancy and supply snags

India's Covid vaccination rollout has continued to falter due to supply shortages and vaccine hesitancy, casting doubt on the government's pledge to vaccinate the entire population by December.

A number of states, including the capital, Delhi, said they had run out of vaccine stocks this week while others including Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra said vaccine supplies were running critically low in many areas, particularly for those aged between 18 and 45.

Manish Sisodia, the deputy chief minister of Delhi, tweeted that "vaccines have run out in Delhi again. The central government gives vaccines for a day or two, then we have to keep the vaccine centres closed for several days."

The central government has disputed the claims of shortages and said all states were informed weeks in advance how many vaccines would be sent to them each month.

Vaccinating India, the second most populous country in the world with more than 1.3 billion citizens, is a gargantuan task. However, nationwide figures show that the country is nowhere near hitting the daily target needed to have the whole adult population vaccinated by the end of 2021, as was promised in May by a government minister, Prakash Javadekar.

Only 5% of the population is fully vaccinated, while about 20% have had one dose.

More than 8 million people need to be vaccinated each day to hit the target of 2.16bn doses administered by December, but on Sunday the turnout fell to 1.3 million, the lowest in months, and the daily average so far for July has been about 4 million.

Fears of a third Covid wave hitting India in the next few months have added an urgency to the vaccination programme. While cases remain extremely low in the capital Delhi, one of the worst hit areas in the devastating second wave, there are still officially about 1,000 Covid deaths per day in India, with the real figure likely to be far higher. The central government has said it is monitoring an alarming rise in cases in states in the north-east and in Kerala in the south.

The Indian Medical Association (IMA) warned on Monday that "the third wave is inevitable and imminent" and urged the government to limit tourist travel and religious activities and pilgrimages, which have picked up again in recent weeks.

"It is painful to note that in this crucial time, when everyone needs to work for the mitigation of the third wave, in many parts of the country, both governments and the public are complacent and engaged in mass gatherings without following Covid protocols," said the IMA in a statement.

Vaccine hesitancy has also been hindering the vaccine rollout, particularly in rural areas. In the impoverished state of Bihar, where vaccine hesitancy is rife owing to misinformation campaigns on social media and WhatsApp and fears vaccines will cause infertility or death, there have been reports of attacks on mobile vaccination centres. Local authorities have been offering villagers home appliances such as fridges and fans and even gold coins as incentives to boost the vaccination turnout.

Yet hesitancy is also present among the educated elite, including doctors, some of whom are concerned in particular by the domestically produced vaccine Covaxin, which still does not have World Health Organization approval.

The prime minister, Narendra Modi, has personally appealed to Indians to get vaccinated on his monthly radio show, and speaking at an event on Monday, the home minister, Amit Shah, also addressed the issue of vaccine hesitancy.

"No one should be under the impression that our fight is over – the only way to win this battle is 100% vaccination of the masses," said Shah.

"However, some communities are still hesitant in taking vaccines. People are not coming forward out of fear that the vaccine will adversely affect them."

China eyes more cooperation with Tajikistan: FM

China is looking forward to more cooperation with Tajikistan in the future, visiting Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi said here on Tuesday.

China and Tajikistan are friendly neighbors and comprehensive strategic partners, and the strategic guidance of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Tajik President Emomali Rahmon is the biggest political advantage and a solid guarantee for bilateral relations, Wang said during talks with Tajik Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriddin.

The two countries are building the China-Tajikistan community of common development and security, and bilateral ties have taken the lead and set an example among China's relations with Central Asian countries, he noted.

As the next year marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Tajikistan, new opportunities will open up for further development of bilateral ties, Wang said.

He said that China is ready to work with Tajikistan to build on the past achievements and strive for new progress to usher in another 30 years of greater successes.

Wang stressed that China and Tajikistan have, as always, understood, trusted and supported each other, protected common interests of developing countries, and upheld international equity and justice.

Both countries are "non-aligned allies" in countering foreign interference and bullying, and they should carry on such a good tradition, he said.

China is grateful to Tajikistan for always supporting China on issues concerning its core interests, Wang said, adding that China will firmly back Tajikistan in safeguarding its independence, sovereignty, and security, while opposing any foreign interference in Tajikistan's internal affairs.

He said China will continue to provide COVID-19 vaccines to Tajikistan, promote medical and health care cooperation, and help Tajikistan prevail over the pandemic.

As epidemic prevention and control has become a new normal, China is willing to strengthen the alignment of development strategies with Tajikistan, and boost high-level cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative, he said.

He said China is ready to maintain a trajectory of growth in bilateral trade despite unfavorable conditions, negotiate and sign a medium-to-long-term plan on economic and trade cooperation, further facilitate trade and investment, and step up agricultural and anti-poverty cooperation.

Wang hopes that both sides will make full use of the mechanism of joint epidemic prevention and control on the borders, and enable border ports to better serve anti-pandemic efforts and economic development.

He said that the "China + Central Asia (C+C5)" is a new type of cooperation mechanism that meets the needs of countries in the region and has broad development prospects.

The C+C5 should make this mechanism bigger, stronger, and long-lasting so as to promote the sustainable development of countries in the region, Wang said.

China will fully support Tajikistan in hosting the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit this year, he added.

Muhriddin, for his part, extended his warm congratulations on the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and highly appreciated China's remarkable achievements under the leadership of the CPC.

He said that since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Tajikistan and China, the two countries have continuously deepened political mutual trust, closely coordinated on international and regional issues, and bilateral relations have developed rapidly.

Xinhua

Sri Lanka economy in crisis as debt mounts, reserves dwindle

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka has cut back on imports of farm chemicals, cars and even its staple spice turmeric as its foreign exchange reserves dwindle, hindering its ability to repay a mountain of debt as the South Asian island nation struggles to recover from the pandemic.

Toothbrush handles, venetian blinds, strawberries, vinegar, wet wipes and sugar are among the hundreds of foreign-made goods that were banned or made subject to special licensing requirements meant to chip away at a trade deficit that has been deepening the country's financial quandary for years.

Shortages are pushing prices higher for many consumer goods, from bread to construction materials to gasoline, triggering protests among Sri Lankans fed up with the prolonged crisis.

Thusitha Vipulanayake ran out of motorcycles to sell in August 2020. Usually able to sell at least 30 a month, and a dozen motorized trishaws, he now gets by selling bottled, locally grown turmeric paste and LED lightbulbs.

"This is something we never expected," Vipulanayake said as he sat at his empty motorcycle showroom along a road outside the capital Colombo.

Sri Lanka was in trouble before the pandemic struck, laying low a tourism industry that is a vital source of foreign exchange earnings. It normally provides jobs for more than 3 million people and accounts for about 5% of GDP.

Visitors already were staying away after deadly suicide bombings on Easter Day 2019 killed more than 250 people. But efforts to revive the industry are falling flat as the country endures another wave of COVID-19 infections.

Now, the country's foreign exchange reserves have dwindled to barely enough to pay for three months of imports at a time when big repayments of its foreign debts are falling due, straining its financial system. The Petroleum Minister, Udaya Gammapilla, recently said the country lacked enough cash to pay for oil imports.

To conserve precious foreign exchange, the government has limited U.S. dollar transactions. Despite the limits imposed last year, imports still outpace the country's exports of tea, rubber, seafood and garments.

"The condition of the economy is in dire straits, there is no doubt about it" said Muttakrishna Sarvananthan, head of the economic research group Point Pedro Institute of Development.

Sri Lanka needs to make foreign debt payments totaling $3.7 billion this year, having paid $1.3 billion so far. That's in addition to local debt, according to the central bank. Its currency has been gradually weakening against other major currencies, making such repayments more costly in local terms.

Fitch Ratings has downgraded Sri Lanka to its CCC category, indicating a real possibility of default. It says the country's foreign debt obligation will balloon to $29 billion over the next five years.

And it is facing the possible loss of preferential trade status for its garment exports to Europe, due to criticism over an terrorism law that critics say violates human rights.

To help rebuild its reserves, Sri Lanka obtained a $1.5 billion swap facility from China earlier this year. A $400 million swap from India will be available by August, according to the Central Bank.

Bangladesh to lift COVID curbs for Eid despite record infections

Bangladesh will lift its nationwide coronavirus lockdown for the country's second-biggest religious festival, the government said on Tuesday, even as new infections soared to record levels.

The cabinet said all restrictions would be eased in the country of 169 million people from Thursday, ahead of the Eid al-Adha festival which will be celebrated from July 20 to 22 this year.

The removal of the curbs would "normalise economic activities" ahead of the celebrations, it added.

Tens of millions of people usually head back to their villages to mark Eid al-Adha with their families.

Bangladesh imposed its strictest-ever lockdown at the start of the month as new COVID-19 cases and deaths climbed to record highs.

Under the lockdown, people were only allowed to leave home for emergencies and to buy essentials, with public transport, shops and offices shut.

But infections have continued to climb, with nearly 14,000 people testing positive on Monday – a new daily record – to take the total number of cases to just more than one million.

The death toll has risen above 16,600. But experts say the real figures could be much higher amid fears of underreporting.

Mohammad Shahidullah, who heads a health committee that advises the government on how to manage the pandemic, said his group of experts opposed the easing of the lockdown.

"The committee opines that this strict lockdown should be continued till there is a declining trend in infections," Shahidullah told AFP.

"Amid the lockdown, there is an increasing trend of infections and fatalities. The infection level is still very high."

There are also fears that crowding at markets to buy animals for slaughter and big gatherings during the festival could become super-spreader events.

Pakistani youth uses e-health to change rural lives

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, visiting a doctor in rural Pakistan was an expense few could afford.

Almost 70% of the Pakistani population lives in underserved rural areas, where healthcare services are hindered by the lack of medical personnel, sparse facilities, and the high cost of treatments.

Things worsened in the wake of the COVID-19, which disrupted supply chains and interrupted the delivery of vital medicines.

As the country fights the pandemic, Muhammad Sarim Raza (24) is using technology to reimagine how health care is delivered to the most vulnerable people in Pakistan.

He's the founder of Riayat, a social enterprise. He also coordinates the Youth Action Hub Pakistan, an UNCTAD youth network of young change makers running innovative programmes to improve the lives of local people.

Mr. Raza has partnered with an all-female digital startup, Sehat Kahani ("health story" in the Urdu language) and Idara al Khair, a local nonprofit organization, to improve health-care coverage for rural dwellers.

They are using telehealth – the provision of health-care services via electronic information and telecommunication technologies – to offer virtual medical consultations to patients in remote locations, and in the comfort of their homes.

"Many people can't afford to physically go to a doctor. Our e-health initiative makes consultations affordable and available to low-income communities," Mr. Raza said.

As the pandemic pushed more people into extreme poverty, Mr. Raza and his team are seeking to save Pakistani lives by expanding access to health-care services and spreading information on disease prevention measures.

At the peak of the COVID-19 outbreak in the country, his team created an e-health platform and mobilized local teachers to conduct door-to-door visits to introduce residents to it, offering general medical check-ups free of charge.

They also established an e-clinic at a local school and organized a virtual workshop to train the teachers on how to register patients on the platform and book appointments with doctors.

A psychologist trained the teachers on how to identify mental health problems such as stress, anxiety and depression.

After the two-week course, the teachers were deployed to visit needy families and collect data on their incomes and prevalent diseases, information that was later used to create a pricing model for the e-clinic.

The team visited 90 families comprising about 540 people and registered them on the platform.

"Physical health was not the only concern. We found that people didn't realize their mental health was deteriorating due to the stress and anxiety caused by not being able to provide food to their families," Mr. Raza said.

They also found that many people didn't know the benefits of good mental health. "They believed that if physical needs were met, mental health didn't matter," Mr. Raza said. The collected data also showed that many people suffered from ear, nose and throat diseases. Mr. Raza's team arranged for the sick people to speak to specialized doctors and receive targeted care at the e-clinic.

Today, the e-clinic has evolved into a subsidized medical centre with doctors, nurses and technicians. With specialized care and emergency treatments now available to the local community, the number of patients is steadily growing.