

India's hardest-hit state battles vaccine shortages

9 April 2021, by Ammu Kannampilly



People in Mumbai stand behind a barrier outside a Covid-19 coronavirus vaccination centre after jabs were stopped due to shortage

Leading hospitals in India's most coronavirus-hit state halted vaccinations Friday, citing shortages as infections across the country crossed 13 million and set a new daily record.

The nation of 1.3 billion is confronting a ferocious second wave that has triggered its fastest infection rate since the pandemic began, with nearly 132,000 cases recorded in the past 24 hours.

In financial and film hub Mumbai, 25 out of 71 private hospitals administering jabs ran out of supplies Thursday, city authorities said.

The situation at government-run inoculation centres was not much better, with a giant 1,000-bed field hospital turning away people arriving for their first dose on Friday morning.

"There is a shortage of vaccines so the programme has been halted," Heeba Patwe, a doctor at a facility normally inoculating 5,000 people daily, told AFP.

Health workers at the huge Lokmanya Tilak Municipal General Hospital were only able to vaccinate some 180 people before stocks finished, a doctor at the facility told AFP.

Similar shortages were in evidence across Mumbai, according to Mangala Gomare, who oversees the city's vaccination programme.

"Most hospitals in Mumbai will exhaust their supplies by the end of the day," Gomare told AFP Friday.

"Some might still have stock for one more day but that's it."

City authorities tweeted that the shortage was "due to non-receipt of stocks" from the national government.

Supply snags

India's vast vaccination programme—which has so far administered 94 million shots—is reportedly facing major supply snags in the quest to inoculate its huge population.

The Times of India reported that states on average had just over five days of stock left, according to health ministry data, with some regions already grappling with severe shortages.

The health minister of Maharashtra state, the epicentre of the pandemic, warned on Wednesday that it would not be able to continue vaccinations beyond the weekend unless stocks were replenished.

In the state's badly hit city of Pune, two leading private hospitals told AFP they had run out of vaccines and would be unable to inoculate anyone until fresh supplies arrived.

"We halted vaccinations yesterday and we expect

to remain shut for the next two or three days," an official at Pune's Noble Hospital said Friday.

Deepak Baid, president of the Association of Medical Consultants in Mumbai, told AFP the situation was becoming increasingly dire.

"Vaccination is the need of the hour, it is the best weapon we have against COVID," he said.

New Delhi has accused state governments—some of which are run by opposition parties—of "distract(ing) attention from their failures" and playing politics.

"There is no shortage of #COVID19Vaccines in any State," Health Minister Harsh Vardhan tweeted on Thursday. "Let's put an end to fear mongering now!"

As infections have soared, authorities have imposed fresh lockdowns in a bid to contain the crisis, with Maharashtra set to enter a weekend lockdown Friday evening.

The eastern state of Chhattisgarh on Friday announced a 10-day lockdown in Raipur district, home to the regional capital, warning that no one would be allowed to enter the area unless performing essential services.

Production capacity at India's Serum Institute, the world's largest vaccine maker by volume, is "very stressed", the firm's CEO Adar Poonawalla said earlier this week, calling for financial help from the government.

Poorer countries, as well as some rich nations, have relied heavily on Serum for supplies of the AstraZeneca vaccine, but last month New Delhi put the brakes on exports to prioritise domestic needs.

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