

India reels amid virus surge, affecting world vaccine supply

April 13 2021, by Sheikh Saaliq and Aniruddha Ghosal



Shop owners hold banners against a partial lockdown imposed by the Maharashtra state government, in Mumbai, India, Thursday, April 8, 2021. India has a seven-day rolling average of more than 100,000 cases per day and has reported 13 million virus cases since the pandemic began, the third-highest total after the United States and Brazil. The western Maharashtra state, home to financial capital Mumbai, is the worst-hit and has nearly half of the country new infections in the past week. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

The Indian city of Pune is running out of ventilators as gasping coronavirus patients crowd its hospitals. Social media is full of people searching for beds, while relatives throng pharmacies looking for antiviral medicines that hospitals ran out of long ago.

The surge, which can be seen across India, is particularly alarming because the country is a major vaccine producer and a critical supplier to the U.N.-backed COVAX initiative. That program aims to bring shots to some of the world's [poorest countries](#). Already the rise in cases has forced India to focus on satisfying its domestic demand—and delay deliveries to COVAX and elsewhere, including the United Kingdom and Canada.

India's decision "means there is very little, if anything, left for COVAX and everybody else," said Brook Baker, a vaccines expert at Northeastern University.

Pune is India's hardest-hit city, but other major metropolises are also in crisis, as daily new infections hit record levels, and experts say that missteps stemming from the belief that the pandemic was "over" are coming back to haunt the country.

When infections began plummeting in India in September, many concluded the worst had passed. Masks and social distancing were abandoned, while the government gave mixed signals about the level of risk. When cases began rising again in February, authorities were left scrambling.



Employees operate a filling machine inside a laboratory at the Serum Institute of India in Pune, India, Thursday, Jan. 21, 2021. In March, the U.N. backed COVAX program that aims to distribute vaccines equitably said that shipments of up to 90 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccines were delayed after Serum Institute decided to prioritize India's needs due to a surge. The company said that they would be able to restart exports if new infections subside in the country. But experts fear that the worst is yet to come. Nearly all states are showing an uptick in infections. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

"Nobody took a long-term view of the pandemic," said Dr. Vineeta Bal, who studies immune systems at the city's Indian Institute of Science Education and Research. She noted, for instance, that instead of strengthening existing hospitals, temporary sites were created. In Pune, authorities are resurrecting one of those makeshift facilities, which was

crucial to the city's fight against the virus last year.

India is not alone. Many countries in Europe that saw declines in cases [are experiencing new surges](#), and infection rates have been climbing in every global region, partially driven by new virus variants.

Over the past week, India had averaged more than 130,000 cases per day. It has now reported 13.5 million virus cases since the pandemic began—pushing its toll past Brazil's and making it second only to the United States', though both countries have much smaller populations. Deaths are also rising and have crossed the 170,000 mark. Even those figures, experts say, are likely an undercount.



People wait in queues outside the office of the Chemists Association to demand

necessary supply of the anti-viral drug Remdesivir, in Pune, India, Thursday, April 8, 2021. India is experiencing its worst pandemic surge, with a seven-day rolling average of more than 130,000 cases per day. Hospitals across the country are starting to get overwhelmed with patients, and experts worry the worst is yet to come. (AP Photo)

Nearly all states are showing an uptick in infections, and Pune—home to 4 million people—is now left with just 28 unused ventilators Monday night for its more than 110,000 COVID-19 patients.

The country now faces the mammoth challenge of vaccinating millions of people, while also contact-tracing the tens of thousands getting infected every day and keeping the [health system](#) from collapsing.

Dilnaz Boga has been in and out of hospitals in recent months to visit a sick relative and witnessed the shift firsthand as cases began to rise. Beds were suddenly unavailable. Nurses warned visitors to be careful. Posters that advised proper mask-wearing sprang up everywhere.

And then, earlier this month, Boga and her 80-year-old mother tested positive. Doctors suggested that her mother be hospitalized, but there weren't any beds available initially. Both she and her mother are now recovering.



A note informing about the COVID-19 vaccine is seen pasted on a wall of a vaccination centre in Mumbai, India, Thursday, April 8, 2021. India's western Maharashtra state, home to financial capital Mumbai, is the worst-hit and has nearly half of the country new infections in the past week. And now some vaccination centers are turning away people due to a shortage. The state said Wednesday that stocks would run out in three days, promoting an angry denial from India's health minister Harsh Vardhan, who blamed the state for "singularly bogging down the entire country's efforts to fight the virus." (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

Compounding concerns about rising cases is the fact that the country's vaccination drive could also be headed for trouble: Several Indian states have reported a shortage of doses even as the federal government has insisted there's enough in stock.

After a sluggish start, India recently overtook the United States in the number of shots it's giving every day and is now averaging 3.6 million. But with more than four times the number of people and that later start, it has given at least one dose to around just 7% of its population.

India's western Maharashtra state, home to Pune and financial capital Mumbai, has recorded nearly half of the country's new infections in the past week. Some vaccination centers in the state turned away people due to shortages.

At least half a dozen Indian states are reporting similarly low stocks, but Health Minister Harsh Vardhan has called these concerns "deplorable attempts by some state governments to distract attention from their failures."



A woman waits to get vaccinated for COVID-19 in Mumbai, India, Thursday, April 8, 2021. India is experiencing its worst pandemic surge, with average daily infections exceeding 130,000 over the past week. The spike is particularly alarming because India is a major vaccine producer and a critical supplier to the U.N.-backed initiative that aims to help distribute shots fairly. Already the rise in cases has forced India to focus on satisfying its domestic demand—and delay deliveries. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

Worries about vaccine supplies have led to criticism of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, which has exported 64.5 million doses to other nations. Rahul Gandhi, the face of the main opposition Congress party, asked Modi in a letter whether the government's export strategy was "an effort to garner publicity at the cost of our own citizens."

Now, India has reversed course. Last month, COVAX said shipments of up to 90 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccines were delayed because the Serum Institute of India decided to prioritize domestic needs.

The institute, which is based in Pune and is the world's largest vaccine maker, told The Associated Press earlier this month that it could restart exports of the vaccine by June —if new coronavirus infections subside. But a continued surge could result in more delays.



People wait in queue to get vaccinated for COVID-19 in Mumbai, India, Thursday, April 8, 2021. India's western Maharashtra state, home to financial capital Mumbai, is the worst-hit and has nearly half of the country new infections in the past week. And now some vaccination centers are turning away people due to a shortage. The state said Wednesday that stocks would run out in three days, promoting an angry denial from India's health minister Harsh Vardhan, who blamed the state for "singularly bogging down the entire country's efforts to fight the virus." (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

And experts warn that India could be looking at just that.

They suspect the most likely cause behind the widespread surge is the presence of more infectious variants. Health officials confirmed last month that 80% of infections in the northern state of Punjab were due to the version of the virus first detected in the United Kingdom. There's

also increasing concern about another new and potentially troublesome variant that was [first detected in India itself](#).

India needs to vaccinate faster and increase measures aimed at stopping the virus's spread, said Krishna Udayakumar, founding director of the Duke Global Health Innovation Center at Duke University. "The coming months in India are extremely dangerous," he said.

Yet, some say the government's confused messaging have failed to communicate the risk.



An ambulance stands at the gate of Jumbo Covid hospital in Pune, India, Thursday, April 8, 2021. On Thursday India's western city of Pune was running out of ventilators. The Indian city of Pune is running out of ventilators as gasping coronavirus patients crowd its hospitals. The surge, which can be seen across

India, is particularly alarming because the country is a major vaccine producer and a critical supplier to the U.N.-backed COVAX initiative. (AP Photo)

Modi has noted the need for people to wear masks due to the "alarming" rise in infections. But over the last few weeks, while on the campaign trail, he has delivered speeches in front of tens of thousands of mask-less supporters.

The [federal government](#) has also allowed huge gatherings during Hindu festivals like the Kumbh Mela, or pitcher festival celebrated in the Himalayan city of Haridwar, where millions of devotees daily take a holy dip into the Ganges river. In response to concerns that it could turn into a "superspreader" event, the state's chief minister, Tirath Singh Rawat, said "the faith in God will overcome the fear of the virus."

"Optics are so important, and we are completely messing it up," said Dr. Shahid Jameel, who studies viruses at India's Ashoka University.

Dozens of cities and towns have imposed partial restrictions and nighttime curfews to try to curb infections, but Modi has ruled out the possibility of another nationwide lockdown. He also rejected calls from states to offer vaccinations to younger people.



People stand outside a vaccination centre after being turned back because of shortage of the COVID-19 vaccine in Mumbai, India, Thursday, April 8, 2021. Some vaccination centers in Mumbai turned away people due to a shortage. Worries about vaccine supplies have led to criticism of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, which has exported 64.5 million doses to other nations. Now, India has reversed course. Last month, COVAX said shipments of up to 90 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccines were delayed because the Serum Institute of India decided to prioritize domestic needs. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)



A poster informing about the shortage of COVID-19 vaccine hangs on the gate of a vaccination centre in Mumbai, India, Thursday, April 8, 2021. India's western Maharashtra state, home to Pune and financial capital Mumbai, has recorded nearly half of the country's new infections in the past week. Some vaccination centers in the state turned away people due to shortages. At least half a dozen Indian states are reporting similarly low stocks, but Health Minister Harsh Vardhan has called these concerns "deplorable attempts by some state governments to distract attention from their failures." (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)



People wait for a mandatory observation after being administered the AstraZeneca vaccine for COVID-19 at a vaccination centre in Mumbai, India, Sunday, April. 11, 2021. India is experiencing its worst pandemic surge, with average daily infections exceeding 130,000 over the past week. The spike is particularly alarming because India is a major vaccine producer and a critical supplier to the U.N.-backed initiative that aims to help distribute shots fairly. Already the rise in cases has forced India to focus on satisfying its domestic demand—and delay deliveries. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

India's COVID-19 cases

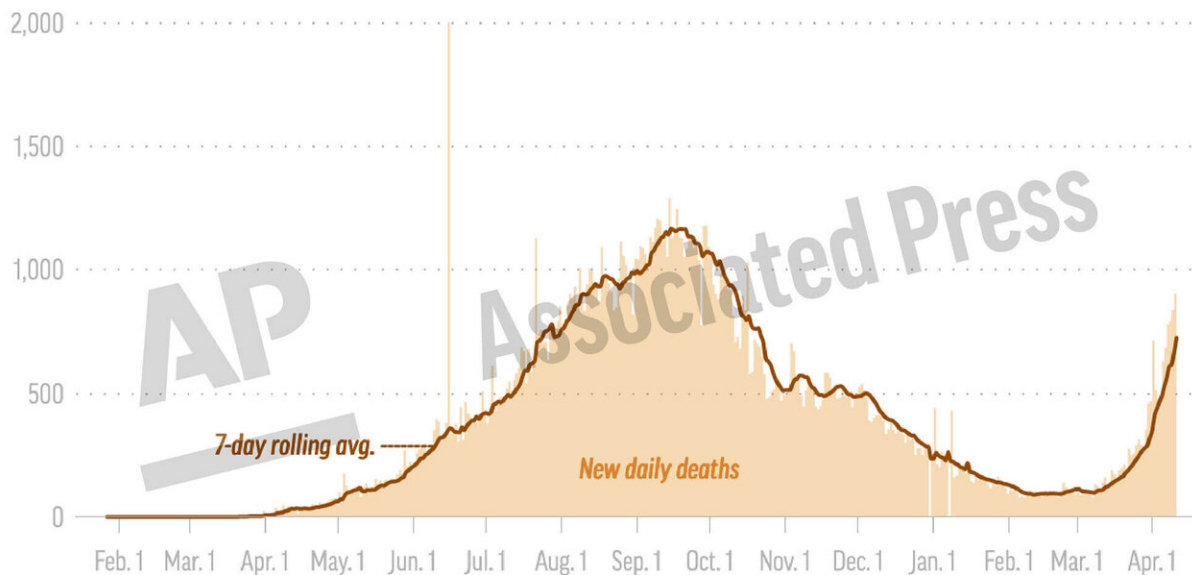


This chart will update daily

Source: Johns Hopkins University / Graphic: Phil Holm & Nicky Forster

AP

Deaths from COVID-19 in India



On June 16 India had added a backlog of 1,672 deaths from Delhi and Maharashtra into this day. This chart will update daily.

Source: Johns Hopkins University / Graphic: Phil Holm & Nicky Forster

AP

This preview of a digital embed shows two charts. One for the number of new daily coronavirus cases in India and the other for new daily deaths in India due to COVID-19. Each chart includes a 7-day rolling average. (AP Digital Embed)



Boxes containing vials of AstraZeneca vaccine for COVID-19 are stored inside a cold room at the Serum Institute of India, Pune, India, Thursday, Jan. 21, 2021. In March, the U.N. backed COVAX program that aims to distribute vaccines equitably said that shipments of up to 90 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccines were delayed after Serum Institute decided to prioritize India's needs due to a surge. The company said that they would be able to restart exports if new infections subside in the country. But experts fear that the worst is yet to come. Nearly all states are showing an uptick in infections. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)



People wearing masks stand in a queue for a train at Lokmanya Tilak Terminus in Mumbai, India, Monday, April 12, 2021. India is experiencing its worst pandemic surge, with average daily infections exceeding 130,000 over the past week. The spike is particularly alarming because India is a major vaccine producer and a critical supplier to the U.N.-backed initiative that aims to help distribute shots fairly. Already the rise in cases has forced India to focus on satisfying its domestic demand—and delay deliveries. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)



People wait in queues outside the office of the Chemists Association to demand necessary supply of the anti-viral drug Remdesivir, in Pune, India, Thursday, April 8, 2021. The Indian city of Pune is running out of ventilators as gasping coronavirus patients crowd its hospitals. Social media is full of people searching for beds, while relatives throng pharmacies looking for antiviral medicines that hospitals ran out of long ago. (AP Photo)



Devotees take holy dips in the Ganges River during Kumbh Mela, or pitcher festival, one of the most sacred pilgrimages in Hinduism, in Haridwar, northern state of Uttarakhand, India, Monday, April 12, 2021. India is experiencing its worst pandemic surge, with average daily infections exceeding 130,000 over the past week. The federal government has allowed huge gatherings during Hindu festivals like the Kumbh Mela where millions of devotees daily take a holy dip into the Ganges river. In response to concerns that it could turn into a "superspreader" event, the state's chief minister, Tirath Singh Rawat, said "the faith in God will overcome the fear of the virus." (AP Photo/Karma Sonam)

Experts, meanwhile, say the current limit of offering vaccine to those over 45 should be relaxed and that shots need to be targeted in areas experiencing surges.

"The burden of COVID-19 is being felt unevenly," said Udayakumar.
"And the response needs to be tailored to local needs."

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