

Countries urge broader patent waivers than just COVID vaccines

May 23 2021, by Nina Larson



Proponents of a patent waiver on Covid-19 vaccines and other treatments argue it would boost access in developing countries.

Dozens of countries have revised a proposal at the WTO for patent waivers for medical tools needed to combat COVID, insisting it must be

broader than just vaccines, non-governmental organisations said Saturday.

More than 60 countries have presented a revision of their text before the World Trade Organization on ditching [intellectual property protections](#) for COVID-19 jabs and other medical tools while the pandemic rages, according to the Doctors Without Borders (MSF) charity and NGO Knowledge Ecology International (KEI).

KEI published what it said was the revised text, which pushed for the waiver to be broad and long-lasting.

The WTO did not immediately verify the authenticity of the document, but a Western diplomat close to the waiver discussions confirmed it was genuine and had been distributed to all WTO members.

That text said the waiver should cover all medical "prevention, treatment and containment" tools needed to battle COVID.

In addition to vaccines, it should include treatments, diagnostics, vaccines, [medical devices](#) and [protective equipment](#), along with the material and components needed to produce them, it said.

It also said the waiver should last for "at least three years" from the date it takes effect, following which, the WTO's General Council should determine whether it could be lifted or should be prolonged.

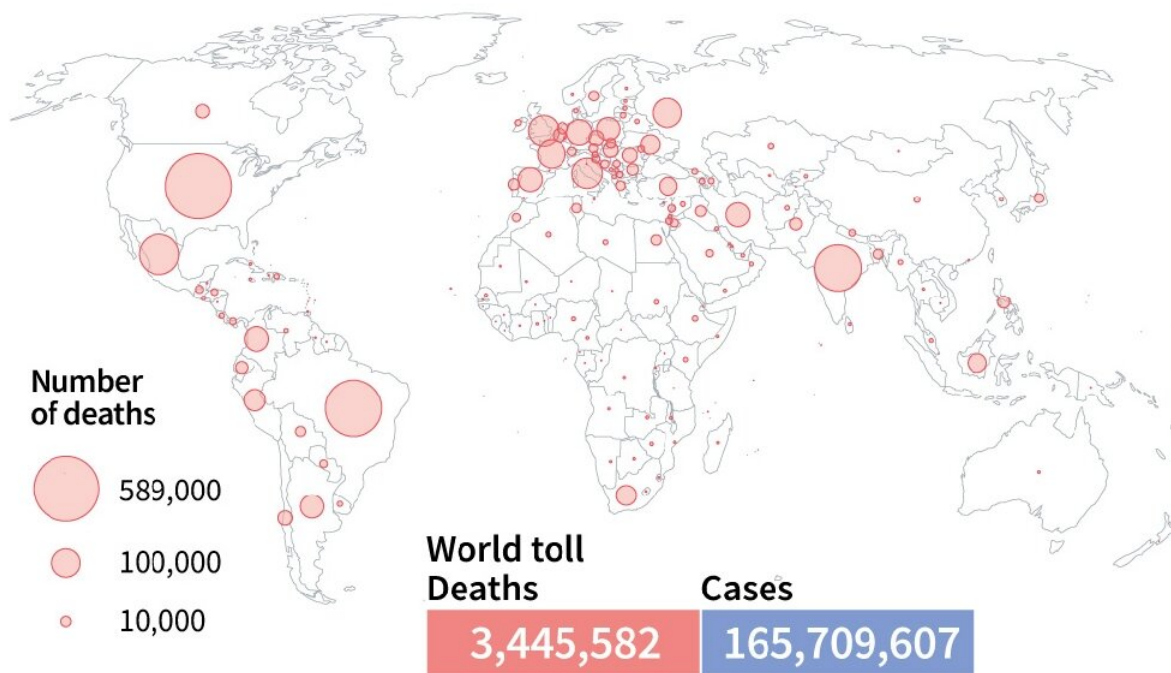
'Frightening increase'

"We are pleased to see the governments sponsoring the COVID-19 intellectual property waiver proposal reaffirm that the waiver aims to remove monopoly barriers for all medical tools ... needed to tackle this pandemic," MSF South Asia chief Leena Manghaney said in a statement.

"With a frightening increase in infections and deaths in developing countries, and with potentially promising treatments in the pipeline, it is crucial that governments have every flexibility at their disposal to beat back this pandemic," she said.

Spread of the coronavirus

As of May 22, 1000 GMT



Source: AFP tallies based on official tolls



Global death toll and coronavirus cases as of May 22 at 1000 GMT, based on AFP tallies.

The WTO has since October faced calls led by India and South Africa for the temporary removal of such IP protections, in what proponents argue will boost production in developing countries and address the

dramatic inequity in access.

That notion has long met with [fierce opposition](#) from pharmaceutical giants and their host countries, which insisted patents were not the main roadblocks to scaling up production and warned the move could hamper innovation.

The positions appeared to shift earlier this month, when Washington came out in support of a global patent waiver for the jabs, with other long-time opponents voicing openness to discuss the matter.

The European Parliament voted narrowly this week to urge Brussels to get behind the proposal.

Observers have however said the ambitions for the waiver appear to differ significantly among the longtime supporters and those now coming around to the idea, who have seemed to focus more narrowly on vaccines.

It remains unclear if countries will be able to see eye to eye, but with the pandemic that has killed over 3.4 million people still far from over, there is intense pressure on them to do so.

With the new revision on the table, MSF called for "governments to immediately move towards text-based negotiations," insisting there was no time to lose.

In light of the WTO's usual glacial pace in decision-making—with agreements requiring consensus backing by all 164 member states—a deal could meanwhile take time.

According to MSF, more than 100 countries overall now support the proposal, including China and Russia.

A full 62 countries are now official co-sponsors of the proposal, with Indonesia, Fiji, Vanuatu and Namibia having joined in recent weeks.

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