

US backs plan to waive COVID-19 vaccine patents

May 5 2021, by Heather Scott



Demonstrators in Washington hold a rally to 'Free the Vaccine,' calling on the US to commit to sharing vaccine formulas with the world to help ensure that every nation has access

US President Joe Biden's administration on Wednesday announced support for a global waiver on patent protections for COVID-19

vaccines, offering hope to poor nations that have struggled to access the life-saving doses.

India, where the death toll hit a new daily record amid fears the peak is still to come, has been leading the fight within the World Trade Organization (WTO) to allow more drugmakers to manufacture the vaccines—a move pharma giants oppose.

US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said that while intellectual property rights for businesses are important, Washington "supports the waiver of those protections for COVID-19 vaccines" in order to end the pandemic.

"This is a global health crisis, and the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic call for extraordinary measures," she said in a statement.

Biden had been under intense pressure to waive protections for vaccine manufacturers, especially amid criticism that rich nations were hoarding shots.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, head of the World Health Organization (WHO), called the US decision "historic" and said it marked "a monumental moment in the fight against COVID19."

Tai cautioned however that negotiations "will take time given the consensus-based nature" of the WTO.

With supplies for Americans secured, the Biden administration will continue efforts "to expand vaccine manufacturing and distribution," and will work to "increase the raw materials needed to produce those vaccines."



Indians are grieving in mass numbers as their country is hit with one of the world's worst pandemic waves

For months the WTO has been facing calls to temporarily remove the intellectual property protections on COVID-19 vaccines, known as a TRIPS waiver in reference to the agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property.

But that notion has been fiercely opposed by pharmaceutical giants and their host countries, which insist the patents are not the main roadblocks to scaling up production, and warned the move could hamper innovation.

"A waiver is the simple but the wrong answer to what is a complex

problem," the Geneva-based International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations lobby group said, describing the US move as "disappointing."

Countries such as New Zealand, however, welcomed the US announcement, while Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison called the move "tremendous news," adding that it would help his country manufacture mRNA vaccines locally.

France, on the other hand, has said it is opposed to the waiver, stating it prefers instead a donation-based model to help poor countries overcome a lack of vaccines.

Devastating surge

While the United States has reached the point of offering donuts and beer to entice vaccine holdouts to get their shots, India reported 3,780 new pandemic deaths and not enough doses to inoculate its people.

India has in recent weeks endured a devastating surge in coronavirus cases, with more than 380,000 infections reported on Wednesday.



India's crisis has been partly fueled by a lack of vaccines

K Vijay Raghavan, the Indian government's principal scientific advisor, said the country of 1.3 billion people had to prepare for a new wave of infections even after beating down the current wave, which has taken the country's caseload above 20 million.

In an effort to boost the country's collapsing health system, India's reserve bank announced \$6.7 billion in cheap financing for vaccine makers, hospitals and health firms.

India's crisis has been partly fueled by a lack of vaccines. This has in turn exacerbated the global shortage as India is the world's biggest

producer of COVID shots.

In London, foreign ministers from the Group of Seven wealthy democracies committed to financially support the vaccine-sharing program, Covax.

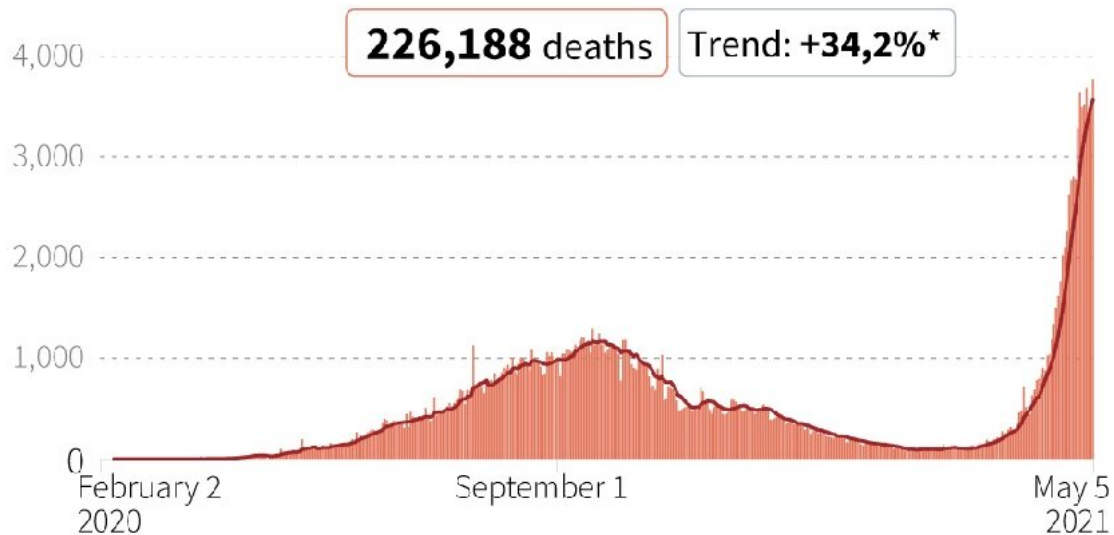
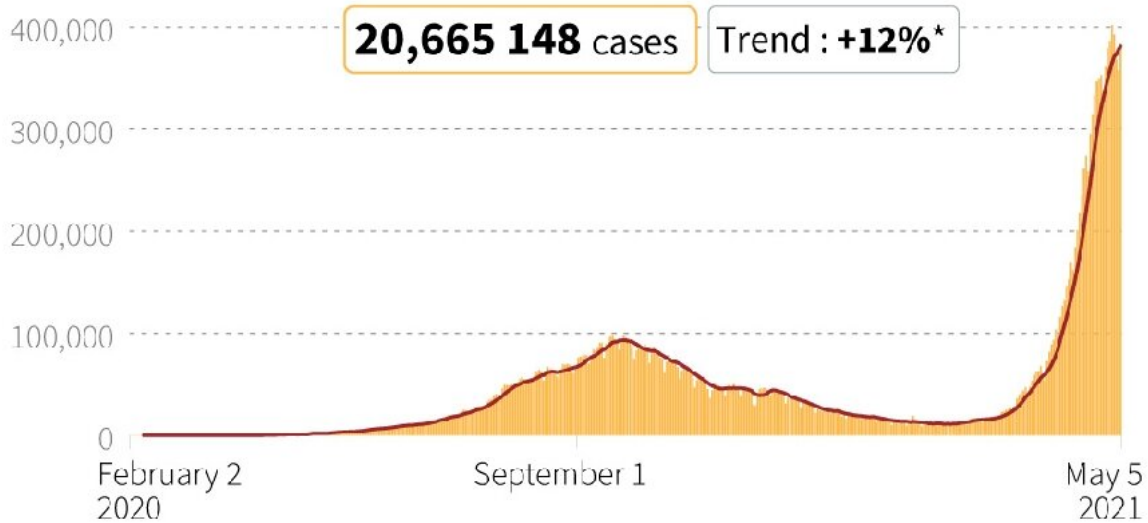
But there was no immediate announcement on fresh funding.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Denmark, where the spread of the virus has been deemed under control, will open up cinemas and theaters plus gyms and fitness centers Thursday. And bars, cafes and restaurants, which have already reopened, will no longer require reservations.

All patrons, however, must present a "corona pass" certificate confirming they have either tested negative in the past 72 hours, been vaccinated or recently recovered from COVID-19.

Covid-19: rise in cases slows in India

Cases and deaths per day, 7-day rolling average



*number of cases and deaths over last 7 days compared to previous week

Source: Indian health authorities, data to May 5



Covid-19 cases and deaths per day in India as of May 5

Vaccine inequity

The pandemic has claimed more than 3.2 million lives worldwide since it first emerged in late 2019, but many wealthy nations have made progress in suppressing the virus as mass vaccination campaigns gather steam.

More than 1.2 billion doses have been administered globally, but fewer than one percent in the least developed countries.

Vaccine shortages are not an issue in the United States, which could soon be sitting on as many as 300 million extra doses—nearly equivalent to its entire population.

Biden on Tuesday said he wanted 70 percent of US adults to have received at least one shot by the July 4 Independence Day holiday.

He also said his administration was "ready to move immediately" if regulators authorize the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for 12- to 15-year-olds.

But some experts question the wisdom of devoting limited vaccine supplies to a low-risk group instead of sharing them with high-risk groups abroad.

In the Middle East, Egypt announced a partial shutdown of malls and restaurants and called off festivities for the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr to curb rising coronavirus cases.

And on Wednesday Argentina broke its record for COVID-19 deaths with 633 recorded fatalities in 24 hours, despite stepped-up measures to reduce movement of people across the country.

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