

WTO inches forward in COVID vaccine patent waiver talks

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After months of debate, WTO members on Wednesday took a first, small step towards a deal aimed at boosting production of COVID vaccines and treatments through patent waivers or compulsory licensing

deals.

The World Trade Organization has struggled to move forward on the hotly-debated issue, since all decisions at the global trade body must be reached by consensus of all 164 member states.

But during a meeting on Wednesday, countries finally backed launching a process towards drafting an agreement, and "agreed on the urgency of this discussion", a Geneva-based trade official said.

Views on the matter meanwhile remain far apart, the trade official said, adding that an initial report on progress in the text-based discussions was expected around July 21-22.

Since October, the WTO has faced calls led by India and South Africa for the temporary removal of such intellectual property protections, in what proponents argue will boost production in developing countries of vaccines, treatments, diagnostics and other vital medical tools needed to battle COVID-19.

This, they have argued, could help address the dire inequity in access to vaccines especially.

That notion 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 seemed to shift some last month, when Washington came out in support of a global patent waiver for COVID jabs, with other long-time opponents voicing openness to discuss the matter.

But others have stuck to their guns.

Some countries, like Switzerland, prefer a scenario in which pharmaceutical companies enter into voluntary licensing deals, as AstraZeneca has done with the Serum Institute of India (SII) to make its COVID-19 jabs.

And the European Commission last Friday presented a counter-proposal to the WTO calling for a multilateral pact aimed at boosting production of COVID-19 vaccines, not by suspending patents but through compulsory licensing deals and by urging countries to remove export restrictions.

That text, along with a revised proposal by India and South Africa that is backed by more than 60 countries, will form the basis for the negotiations.

Addressing Wednesday's debate, US Charge d'affaires David Bisbee stressed Washington's strong belief in IP protections.

"But we must do what is necessary to accelerate manufacturing and equitable distribution of vaccines," he said, insisting that "the WTO must show that it can step up in a [global crisis](#) and act efficiently to improve the lives of ordinary people."

"We must all come together to find a solution expeditiously, especially as the pandemic continues to spread with new variants."

Bisbee said Washington was still examining the revised proposal from India and South Africa, adding though that it appeared to mark a "relatively modest change".

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