WTO fails anew to agree Covid jab IP waiver proposal

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World Trade Organization countries failed anew Tuesday to agree a proposal to suspend intellectual property rights on COVID-19 vaccines in order to boost production and fill a void in poor nations.

WTO states held talks at the global body's headquarters in Geneva but could not reach a consensus, WTO spokesman Keith Rockwell told

reporters following nine months of discussions on what he called a "very emotional issue."

Members will hold an informal meeting in early September to discuss the state of play, followed by a formal meeting on October 13 and 14.

"There's no way they're going to stop discussing this. It's too important," Rockwell said, after hours of talks on day one of the two-day WTO General Council meeting.

"It's a very emotional issue, and it's not going to stop.

India and South Africa brought forward the intellectual property waiver idea in October.

Proponents argue the temporary removal of IP rights 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 insist patents are not the main roadblocks to scaling up production and warn the move could hamper innovation.

Getting more jabs

The WTO's 164 member states take all decisions by consensus.

Rockwell said all countries agreed on the need to ramp up production quickly, but disagreed on how best to achieve the goal.

He said there was surplus capacity in Senegal, Bangladesh, India, South Africa, Thailand, Morocco and Egypt, but while they might have

untapped expertise, they would need to have technology and know-how on producing COVID-19 vaccines.

"They have the capacity to do this. And so the question is, how do you tap into that unused capacity?" said Rockwell.

The debate is focused around the WTO's Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of IP Rights (TRIPS) and provisions relating to the medical prevention, containment or treatment tools needed to battle COVID-19.

India and South Africa can count on the backing of several dozen countries, including notably the United States and China.

Rockwell said the opponents of the idea included European countries, Japan and South Korea.

However, a group of countries are also focused on getting "a pragmatic outcome, whatever that may be," he added.

The negotiations have hit a few particular sticking points, notably the duration of the waiver, the scope in terms of products covered and the TRIPS provisions.

Other tricky areas include implementation, and the protection of undisclosed information, said Rockwell.

Some 3.93 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been administered around the world, according to an AFP count.

Just 0.3 percent of them have been injected in the 29 lowest-income countries, home to nine percent of the global population.

"Getting production in developing countries to a higher level so that

more shots can go into more arms in Africa, Latin America and Asia, is of critical importance to everyone here," Rockwell said.

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