

“India, the world’s factory for Covid vaccines” RFI online (10/12/20, reported by Heike Schmidt)

India, the second most Covid-19 contaminated country in the world, is poised to become the largest supplier of vaccines. In particular, the country could supply a large part of the serums destined for developing countries, as India’s ambassador to France, Jawed Ashraf, explained in an interview with RFI.

RFI: In a telephone conversation this week, your Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Emmanuel Macron agreed to improve access to Covid vaccines. Today, however, rich countries have already cornered 53% of the most promising vaccines. Will India, the world’s leading vaccine producer, be the vaccine factory for poor countries?

Jawed Ashraf: I think the biggest global challenge in the coming years will be to make sure that vaccines are available, affordable and accessible to all, and not just for the richest. At the G20 summit, our Prime Minister Narendra Modi promised that India will do its utmost to ensure that vaccines against Covid is available to all. Our production capacities will therefore be put to work to ensure universal access. Our vaccines are produced at very low cost and we will share them with other countries.

RFI: The Serum Institute of India, the world’s leading vaccine institute, is already producing 60 million doses per month of AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine and promises that half of its production will be reserved for low-income countries, at \$3 per dose. When will exports begin? And who will be the first countries to benefit?

Jawed Ashraf: As soon as the vaccines are officially approved and licensed locally, they will be channelled through our own development assistance programmes to our neighbours and Africa. In Africa, we are present in 47 of the 54 countries. Of course, we will have to set priorities, and we will work with our partners through multilateral mechanisms, among which France and Germany; other European countries also play an important role. We are going to choose the recipient countries together. This will also depend on the health emergencies in each country.

RFI: Mass production has already started this summer, well before the end of the clinical tests. Will these “made in India” vaccines be safe?

Jawed Ashraf: Unicef already buys 60% of its vaccines from India. 25% of all vaccines produced worldwide are made in India. Of course, we respect the highest standards. No compromises will be made. We are not in a race with any other country to get there first. Nor do we want to win huge sums of money. I would also like to remind you that India has extensive experience in vaccination. Every year, we administer 650 million doses of vaccine to vulnerable people, including 100 million children and 30 million pregnant women. I am sure that our partners will trust us.

RFI: At the beginning of the pandemic, China conducted a real “mask diplomacy” - will we see an Indian vaccine diplomacy?

Jawed Ashraf: I don't want to comment on the strategies employed by other countries. Our vaccines will be neither a geopolitical tool nor a matter of national pride. During the early days of the Covid crisis, we provided 150 countries with missing drugs, such as hydroxychloroquine or paracetamol. We did not brag about that. If India did not provide its pharmaceutical infrastructure, we would be accused of being insensitive to global needs. India will play a crucial role, because we are able to mass produce vaccines, cheaply and of good quality. The Indian Serum Institute will produce 200 million doses for the international Covax programme. We see this as our contribution to the global effort.

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