

## **US Aid Arrives as India Grapples with COVID-Triggered Humanitarian Crisis**

MUMBAI, INDIA - The first emergency aid of critical medical supplies arrived in India from the United States on Friday, as the country grapples with a humanitarian crisis after being hit with the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the death toll soaring past 200,000, the race to save lives is getting more frantic with India's health care system virtually crushed under the relentlessly rising numbers.

A U.S. Super Galaxy military transporter brought more than 400 oxygen cylinders and other hospital equipment as well as rapid coronavirus tests to New Delhi.

U.S. officials said that special flights which will also bring equipment donated by companies and individuals, will continue into next week.

President Joe Biden has pledged to support India in its fight against the coronavirus. On Friday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke to Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar "to reaffirm the strength of the U.S.-India partnership in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic," according to a statement from State Department spokesman Ned Price.

"Expressing his appreciation for Indian assistance in America's time of need, Secretary Blinken reviewed comprehensive ongoing U.S. government efforts in support of the Indian government's COVID-19 response operations," said Price. "He also noted the outpouring of support from U.S. industries, non-governmental institutions, and private citizens for COVID-19 relief efforts in India."

Some 40 countries including major powers Russia, Britain, France, Germany and Japan, and smaller countries such as Thailand and Taiwan, have promised to send medical supplies as part of an international aid effort to address the shortage of critical oxygen and medicine. China, with whom India's ties are strained, has also offered to send aid.

"We are facing an unprecedented second wave of the pandemic," Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla said on Thursday.

For ordinary citizens that "unprecedented" situation means waging a desperate battle to save loved ones. The anguished appeals for oxygen, hospital beds, intensive care units, medicines and even wood to cremate the dead continue to dominate social media. At its overburdened crematoriums, grieving people wait into the night to perform the last rites for their family members.

While the Indian capital is one of the worst hit by the second wave, the virus is also wreaking havoc in other parts of the country.

Adding to India's woes, vaccines are in short supply — several Indian states said they will be unable to expand the vaccination program to people over the age of 18 beginning

Saturday, as planned, because they do not have stock. So far, the vaccination drive was restricted to those above 45 years of age.

With hospitals overwhelmed, the Indian army has opened several of its hospitals to civilians and is helping in setting up medical facilities in several cities.

Amid the outcry from citizens, the Indian government has defended itself. Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said this week that the country's fatality rate per million was the lowest in the world and that the oxygen supplies were "adequate."

India reported 386,452 news cases in the past 24 hours, while deaths from COVID-19 jumped by 3,498, according to health ministry data. For more than a week, the country has set a daily global record reporting over 300,000 infections.

But many experts say India's official death count and total count of 18.8 million cases is an underestimate. There is also criticism that India did not pay sufficient attention to a new variant of the coronavirus that is infecting people.

About 350 scientists and medical researchers in an online appeal urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to allow them access to government data such as sequencing of virus variants, testing and recovered patients that could help study, predict and curb the spread of the coronavirus. The data is not available to non-government experts.

"While new pandemics can have unpredictable features, our inability to adequately manage the spread of infections has, to a large extent, resulted from epidemiological data not being systematically collected and released in a timely manner to the scientific community," the appeal stated.

Public health experts say India's health facilities are failing under the exponential rise in numbers because health officials neglected to ramp up health infrastructure during the six months when cases dipped amid complacency that the worst of the pandemic was over.

"We were clearly underprepared for the second wave. A lot of temporary facilities set up and staff were let go after the first wave," said Anant Bhan, a public health expert. "So, when the cases increased, we were found wanting. The second issue is we took things too lightly too soon. There was not much adherence to public health measures such as masking, and large religious and political events were held, which aided the spread of the infection. Also, the spread of new variants which are more infectious in nature have led to this situation."