

Statement by External Affairs Minister in Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha on the Vaccine Maitri Initiative

March 17, 2021

Chairman Sir, I rise to apprise this august House of the progress we have made in taking forward the Vaccine Maitri initiative. Before I share the details of the initiative itself, I seek the indulgence of the House to explain the thinking behind it.

2. Chairman Sir, as Indians, we are all naturally internationalist by virtue of our culture, traditions, heritage and history. We have never seen a contradiction between this internationalism and the nationalism that was the driver of our independence struggle and subsequent endeavours at nation building. Indeed, this experience of the freedom movement has even further reinforced our internationalism, by creating a strong solidarity with other nations who similarly struggled for their freedom. In recent years, as democracy struck deeper roots, we have found our own cultural expressions and identities that define us in a diverse world. In fact, drawing from our heritage, we have become even stronger voices for international cooperation and solidarity. That, of course, is most in demand at times of global stress, such as the Covid pandemic.

3. Chairman Sir, many of us may share these sentiments and beliefs. The challenge of policy-making is to give that a practical shape. In the case of our Government, Prime Minister Modi's vision has provided an over-arching framework to make our goodwill meaningful in terms of practical initiatives and activities. We already saw that in our humanitarian assistance and disaster responses, whether in Yemen and Nepal or Mozambique and Fiji. As a result, in the last few years, India has developed a reputation of being the first and reliable responder in the region. We saw that too in critical negotiations of global importance like the Paris Agreement, where we had a key bridging role. Or indeed in the International Solar Alliance or the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, two notable initiatives envisioned by the Prime Minister. When it came to Africa, we raised the level of our cooperation very substantially at the IAFS-3 Summit in 2015. Our projects, training and presence has today spread widely across that continent. From the Caribbean to the Pacific Islands, the message has been clear that the Prime Minister of India not only has the willingness to engage them personally, but to back that up with concrete development programmes. It is this outlook of human-centric global cooperation that is the driving force of Vaccine Maitri.

4. Sir, even as the Covid pandemic was in full fury, there were already global demands of our pharmaceutical and medical capabilities. If we could meet them, it was largely due to the extraordinary ramp up of our Covid-related capabilities with which the House is familiar. We are all cognizant of the low fatality rates and the high recovery rates that resulted from the Prime Minister's leadership and the Government's focused efforts. But there was an external beneficial impact of our capabilities as well. India could meet the spiking requirements of hydroxychloroquine, paracetamol and other relevant drugs across the world. In fact, we supplied 150 nations with medicines, 82 of them as grants by India.

As our own production of masks, PPEs and diagnostic kits grew, we made them available to other nations as well. This generous approach, so characteristic of our culture, was also extended to the Vande Bharat Mission. Starting from Wuhan, we brought back nationals of other countries while looking after our own.

5. The House would, therefore, appreciate that as we contemplated the prospect of vaccination against Covid-19, a similar approach was natural. Our domestic vaccination programme started in January 2021 and within a few days, we also started assisting our immediate neighbours.

6. Chairman Sir, the basis for doing so was the assurance that Prime Minister gave in his virtual address to the UN General Assembly in September 2020. On that occasion, he declared that India's vaccine production and delivery capacity will be used to help all humanity in fighting this crisis. We also offered to enhance cold chain and storage capacities for the delivery of vaccines. This approach is not only in keeping with our age-old tradition of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, as I have noted earlier. It is also the contemporary outlook of this Government to utilize India's growing capacities for the benefit of humankind. As a prominent nation in an increasingly multi-polar world, the international community has greater expectations of us, and we, in turn, are prepared to demonstrate our willingness to shoulder greater responsibilities.

7. From the very beginning, India has always believed that the pandemic threatens the entire humanity and that the rightful response would be a collective one. Accordingly, as early as 15 March 2020, Prime Minister took the initiative to hold a meeting of SAARC Heads of Governments to fashion a regional response. An important outcome was the creation of the SAARC COVID-19 Fund that supported the early exchanges on this issue within the region. We then held workshops and training courses to strengthen capacities for handling vaccines and other aspects of public health and COVID-19 management. Most recently, that was followed up by a meeting of our senior health officials of the region on 18 February 2021. They shared the outcome of their deliberations with Prime Minister, who urged a special visa scheme for doctors and nurses, coordinating a regional air ambulance agreement, a platform for studying data on the effectiveness of vaccines and a network for technology-assisted epidemiology for preventing future pandemics.

8. Chairman Sir, our efforts, of course, went well beyond the neighbourhood when it came to online training and capability building. The Ministry of External Affairs conducted 14 e-ITEC courses in partnership with premier institutions like AIIMS and PGI Chandigarh. There was even an exclusive one conducted in Bangla for Bangladeshi professionals. And one by Armed Forces Medical Services for the military doctors in South-east Asia. These 14 courses had a total of 1131 professional participants from 47 countries.

9. In planning and executing Vaccine Maitri, we are naturally guided by a determination to make a difference at a difficult moment for global society. Our reputation as the 'Pharmacy of the World' has been reinforced in that process. So indeed has the faith in 'Make in India'. But more than the vaccines themselves, our policies and conduct have emerged as a source of strength for the stressed and

vulnerable nations of the world. They can see that there is at least one major nation that truly believes in making vaccines accessible and affordable to others in dire need.

10. The House should be aware that the supply of vaccines abroad is based on the assessment of adequate availability at home. This is continuously monitored and takes into account the requirements of our domestic vaccination programme as it unfolds in different phases. An empowered Committee oversees this entire process.

11. Quite appropriately, Vaccine Maitri began in the immediate neighbourhood, starting with the Maldives, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, as also Mauritius and Seychelles. The extended neighbourhood followed thereafter, especially the Gulf. Supplying smaller and more vulnerable nations was then the logic of reaching out to regions from Africa to the CARICOM. There were also contracts that our producers have entered into with other nations, either bilaterally or through the Covax initiative. To date, we have supplied 'Made in India' vaccines to 72 nations across geographies.

12. Sir, the House should recognize the enormous feeling for India that our initiative has generated. Those sentiments have naturally been expressed by leaders and prominent personalities of many nations. But more than that, our Ambassadors feel every day the warmth of ordinary people across the world for India. In the truest sense, this has been people-centric diplomacy at work. The world sees not just the selfless outlook of India but also of the quality of our products and capabilities. The Covid pandemic has been a test of fire for all of us. But I can confidently state that even in the midst of a global crisis, the Prime Minister's initiative of such deep friendship has raised India's standing and generated great international goodwill for us.

Thank You.