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No shortage of vaccines, Oppn. politicising the issue: Vardhan

Minister hits out at Maharashtra for 'covering up' its poor immunisation efforts

JACOB KOSHY
NEW DELHI

Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan, in a no-holds-barred attack on Maharashtra on Wednesday, accused it of demanding universal vaccination for all adults to cover up its "poor vaccination efforts".

Maharashtra, which has the highest number of COVID-19 cases and deaths in India, was putting its citizens in danger by allowing them to escape institutional quarantine for the sake of "personal *vasuli* (extortion)", Dr. Vardhan said. "Overall, as the State has lurched from one crisis to another, it seems as if the State leadership is happily sleeping at the wheel," he said.

In recent days, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh have complained of erratic vaccine supplies. The Centre has consistently maintained that there are no shortages, that the vaccine strategy has been put in place after consultation with the States, and because "supply is limited", the priority has been to vacci-

In the slow lane

India has administered 6,310 doses per 1 lakh population as of April 5, lower than the world average of 8,900 doses. India's vaccination pace is relatively slower than comparable economies

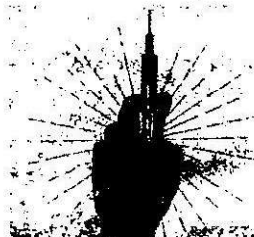
Country	March 1	March 15	April 5
Israel	94,320		
Chile	18,360	36,850	
U.K.	31,410	39,040	
U.S.	22,990	32,620	50,410
Brazil	3,980	5,600	10,750
China			10,140
World		4,930	8,900
Russia		5,280	8,550
India			6,310
Sri Lanka			
Bangladesh			

Source: Our World in Data | The numbers represent doses, not persons

nate healthcare and frontline workers and groups at risk.

Though several non-NDA ruled States were upbraided, much of Dr. Vardhan's ire was directed at Maharashtra.

"In particular, I have seen statements made by public representatives in Maharash-



tra about shortage of vaccines. This is nothing but an attempt to divert attention from the Maharashtra government's repeated failures to control the spread of the pandemic," his letter noted.

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Vaccination at workplaces from April 11

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NEW DELHI

The Centre has decided to allow COVID-19 vaccination sessions at private and public workplaces with about 100 eligible/willing beneficiaries.

The States and the Union Territories have been asked to prepare for the launch by April 11, a Union Health Ministry official told *The Hindu*, adding that the move was aimed at making the vaccine more accessible.

"Only employees aged 45 years and above will be eligible at the workplace. No outsider, including eligible family members, will be allowed," the official added.

The Centre said sessions may be organised at workplaces by tagging them with existing vaccination centres.

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Vaccination at workplaces from April 11

The Ministry has also prepared guidelines to support the States/UTs to help organise these sessions. "COVID-19 vaccination was extended to all citizens aged 45 years and above from April 1 and a substantial proportion of this population is in the organised sector of the economy. The move then is aimed at making the vaccine more accessible," a communication from Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan said.

The sessions will still require beneficiaries to register on the Co-WIN portal prior to vaccination, and the workplace management will designate one of its senior staff members to be the nodal officer for coordinating

with the district health authorities/private COVID-19 vaccination centres and support vaccination activities.

"The schedule of vaccination session can be made up 15 days in advance and intimated to the workplace so that maximum attendance is ensured on the day of the vaccination. In most of the workplaces vaccination schedule may, however, be completed in less than 15 days," the guidelines said.

The guidelines added that one fully trained vaccination team should be assigned to vaccinate 100 beneficiaries at the workplace. Private CVCs will deploy the vaccination team at private workplaces.

No shortage of vaccines, says Health Minister

"The inability of Maharashtra government to act responsibly is beyond comprehension. To spread panic among the people is to compound the folly further. Vaccine supplies are being monitored on a real-time basis, and State governments are being apprised regularly about it. Allegations of vaccine shortage are utterly baseless," it further stated.

He marked out the three States – all led by non-NDA governments – to argue that they were coming up short compared with several other States in vaccinating healthcare and frontline workers, and those above 45 years, and trying to "politicise" the pandemic.

He also picked out Chhattisgarh for "petty politicking" and said the State's overarching reliance on rapid antigen tests and its early refusal to use Covaxin gave it the "dubious distinction of being the only government in the world to incite vaccine hesitancy". He said there were 10 States that had inoculated more than 90% of their healthcare workers, when Maharashtra had man-

aged "only 86%", while Punjab and Delhi had carried out 64% and 72%, respectively. "Among frontline workers, Maharashtra has vaccinated only 73% with first dose. Equivalent numbers for Delhi and Punjab are 71% and 65%. There are five Indian States/UTs that have already done more than 85%. When it comes to senior citizens, Maharashtra has vaccinated just 25%, Delhi has vaccinated 30% and Punjab only 13%. There are four States/UTs that have already vaccinated more than 50%. Doesn't it seem evident that these States are trying to divert attention from their poor vaccination efforts by just continuously shifting the goal-posts?"

Amid a second wave, which is now seeing more than 1,00,000 new cases being added everyday, there has been a clamour for opening up vaccines for all adults. However, Serum Institute of India has said that its production lines have been stretched, and that India must provide it with ₹3,000 crore to boost production capacity.