

US races to send COVID-19 aid to India

(Reuters) – The United States is deeply concerned by a massive surge in coronavirus cases in India and will race additional support to the Indian government and health care workers, a White House spokeswoman said on Saturday.

"We are in active conversations at high levels and plan to quickly deploy additional support to the Government of India and Indian health care workers as they battle this latest severe outbreak. We will have more to share very soon," the spokeswoman told Reuters via email.

Washington is under increasing pressure to do more to help India, the world's largest democracy and a strategic ally in President Joe Biden's efforts to counter China, as it grapples with a record-setting surge in coronavirus infections.

The Indian government has deployed military planes and trains to get urgently needed oxygen to Delhi from other parts of the country and foreign countries, including Singapore.

The number of cases across the country surged by a record daily rise of 349,691 on Sunday, for a total of 16.96 million cases, including 192,311 deaths, the health ministry said.

The country of 1.3 billion people



MOUNTING TOLL: Health workers wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) carry bodies of people who were suffering from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), outside the Guru Teg Bahadur hospital, in New Delhi, India, April 24. Adnan Abidi/Reuters

is on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe, Ashish Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, warned in an op-ed published Saturday in the Washington Post.

He said some 2,000 people were dying daily, but most experts estimated that the true number was five to 10 times that level.

Officials from both countries are engaged at various levels to ensure "a small supply of inputs and components from U.S. companies for production of COVID-19 vaccines in India," a spokesman at the Indian Embassy in Washington told Reuters.

He said it was important to work together to identify ways to over-

come bottlenecks in medical supply chains and expedite ongoing vaccination efforts.

Jha called on Washington to send India oxygen, excess testing kits and high-quality personal protective equipment, including face masks, and medicines to treat COVID-19 patients, including sedatives and Remdesivir.

Jha also urged the Biden administration to share excess vaccines with India and other countries in crisis, noting that the United States had an estimated 30 million unused doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine that is in use elsewhere, but has not been authorized by U.S. regulators.

Washington should also lift export controls on raw materials put in place via the Defense Production Act and an associated export embargo in February, Jha wrote.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki on Friday said U.S. and Indian officials were working to find ways to help address the crisis, but gave no timetable for the support.

She said the United States has already provided India some \$1.4 billion in health assistance, emergency relief supplies, pandemic training for Indian state and local health officials, and ventilators.

EU calls out China for endangering South China Sea peace



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SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION

(Reuters) – The European Union called out China on Saturday for endangering peace in the South China Sea and urged all parties to abide by a 2016 tribunal ruling which rejected most of China's claim to sovereignty in the sea, but which Beijing has rejected.

The EU last week released a new policy aimed at stepping up its influence in the Indo-Pacific region to counter China's rising power.

The Philippines on Friday protested to China over its failure to withdraw what it called as "threatening" boats believed to be manned by maritime militia around the disputed Whitsun Reef, which Manila calls the Julian Felipe Reef.

"Tensions in the South China Sea, including the recent presence of large Chinese vessels at Whitsun Reef, endanger peace and stability in the region," a EU spokesperson said in a statement on Saturday.

EU reiterated its strong opposition to "unilateral actions that could undermine regional stability and international rules-based order".

It urged all parties to resolve disputes peacefully in accordance with international law, and highlighted a 2016 international arbitration that had ruled in favor of the Philippines while invalidating most of China's claims in the South China Sea.

China rejected EU's accusation that its ships at Whitsun Reef, which China calls Niu'E Jiao, had endangered peace and security.

The Chinese Mission to the EU in a statement on Saturday reiterated that the reef is part of China's Nansha Islands, or Spratly Islands, and that it was "reasonable and lawful" for Chinese fishing boats to operate there and shelter from the wind.

The Chinese statement also insisted that China's sovereignty, rights and interests in the South China Sea were formed in the "long course of history and consistent with international law" and rejected the 2016 tribunal ruling as "null and void".

"The South China Sea should not become a tool for certain countries to contain and suppress China, much less a wrestling ground for major-power rivalry," the Chinese statement said.

China is increasingly worried that Europe and other countries are heading U.S. President Joe Biden's call for a "coordinated approach" towards China, which had so far materialised in the form of sanctions over its security crackdown in Hong Kong and treatment of Uyghur Muslims.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken last month said Washington "stands by its ally, the Philippines," in the face of China's massing maritime militia at Whitsun Reef.