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United Nations, May 13 (RHC)-- United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has called for the need to double the capacity of COVID-19 vaccine production and for fairer redistribution of the shots in the developing world, which faces new waves of the coronavirus.

Guterres says many developing countries have not received a single dose of a COVID vaccine [File: Hannibal Hanschke/Reuters]

Many countries are experiencing shortages of the vaccine, especially India, worsening a dire second wave of infections that has left hospitals and morgues overflowing while families scramble for increasingly scarce medicines and oxygen.

At the same time, some rich countries have moved beyond vaccinating their most vulnerable citizens, offering the jab to younger people, while several countries have secured enough vaccine supplies to inoculate their populations more than once.

"It is totally unacceptable to live in the world, in which developed countries can vaccinate most of its population, while many developing countries have not access to one single dose," Guterres told a briefing on Wednesday after meeting Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow.

He mentioned the risks of coronavirus mutations and new variants as the virus spreads "like wildfire" in different parts of the developing world. "So, that's in interest of everybody that everybody is vaccinated everywhere. We believe that we need two things: to double the world's capacity of production of vaccines and at the same time to have a more equitable distribution of vaccines", Guterres said.

Last October, South Africa and India submitted a request to the WTO to waive intellectual property rights on vaccines and other medical technologies needed to combat the coronavirus for the duration of the pandemic. More than 100 other countries have since supported that call.

Last week, Guterres welcomed the United States government's support for the patent waiver. The decision ultimately is up to the 164-member World Trade Organization, and if just one country votes against a waiver, the proposal will fail.

The head of the WTO said on Friday the US administration's call to remove patent protections on COVID-19 vaccines would give an impetus to negotiations to resolve access inequity but that the decision in and of itself would not resolve the problem.

The pharmaceutical industry has argued that a waiver will do more harm than good in the long run. Easing patent protections would eat into their profits, potentially reducing the incentives that push companies to innovate and make the kind of tremendous leaps they did with the COVID-19 vaccines, which have been churned out at a blistering, unprecedented pace.

The industry has contended, too, that production of the vaccines is complicated and cannot be ramped up simply by easing patent rights. Instead, it has said that reducing snarls in supply chains and shortages of ingredients is a more pressing issue.

The industry has insisted that a faster solution would be for rich countries to share their vaccine stockpiles with poorer ones. "A waiver is the simple but the wrong answer to what is a complex problem," said the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations. "Waiving patents of COVID-19 vaccines will not increase production nor provide practical solutions needed to battle this global health crisis."



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