

**Editorial****COVID-19 Vaccination****Mohsin Masud Jan**

Editor

As the pandemic threatens Pakistan with the third phase, the government has so far received COVID-19 vaccine only from China.

It has not procured yet anything from the open market and is now awaiting more vaccines from the COVAX Facility, but it has not made any bilateral agreement with India in this regard. Recently Indian media reports referred to Pakistan receiving vaccines directly from India while some senior officials here had also mentioned this.

However, when the matter was taken up with the Foreign Office during the weekly media briefing, the spokesman made it clear that there was no bilateral procurement agreement with India.

“Regarding the procurement of Covid-19 vaccine, Pakistan has not entered into any bilateral procurement agreement for COVID-19 vaccine from India.

GAVI, the international vaccine alliance, has offered provision of vaccine doses to several countries, including Pakistan, under its COVAX Facility”, he clarified. The procurement and supply mechanism of the vaccine doses are undertaken by GAVI and not the recipient countries. The spokesman said he did not have the exact details of the doses of the vaccine which were coming in and it was better for the Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination to give the figures.

Covid cases are rising in the country, with positivity having gone up to 5.35 percent. All this is happening as the country enters the vaccination phase of the crippling pandemic that has taken so many lives across the world. Unfortunately, the general hesitation among people to use the vaccine – spurred no doubt by the near-ridiculous fake news doing the rounds on social media – and the level of confusion regarding the how, when, what of vaccination will be real hindrances to an effective vaccination drive. This will just lead to the risk of more cases appearing and fewer people being rendered immune to the disease. Doctors report ICUs are filling up again and they are struggling to cope with the problem.

What is urgently required is a mass awareness campaign regarding vaccination. The electronic media, the civil society, doctors' and nurses' associations – everyone – must be taken on board a well-thought-out campaign to introduce the vaccines,

encourage compliance, and bust some disturbing myths and false rumours. What can be better than a common citizen seeing the country's top leaders – in politics or entertainment or other fields – roll up their sleeves and get their first shot of the vaccine. The power of celebrity or fame or influence must be used to ensure Pakistanis are vaccinated. Meanwhile, the government also needs to perhaps set out an FAQ sheet – because vaccine questions are many and till now we have not had luck with too many answers from the official end.

The reason all this is necessary is because there has been some lag in the country's vaccination process. But we wonder if this is enough and if anything can be achieved, until more focus is placed on making sure the vaccine reaches the maximum number of people.

The question we need to ask ourselves is how the government has handled the pandemic and what it has done to spare people the kind of suffering they seem to be going through. There needs to be a further investigation into the suicide rate in Pakistan. Generally, we do not talk about the problem at all. But especially in the context of Covid-19 pandemic, it does need to be discussed.

Like other countries around the world, Pakistan desperately needs vaccines. In Pakistan, we then have the additional problem of people who do not want to be vaccinated, and concern over the quality of the Chinese vaccine seems to be a factor in this. The government needs to work much harder to persuade people that vaccination is essential and also to follow the SOPs that seem to have been abandoned completely. People had already decided that the pandemic was over. Many of them had not believed in it in the first place.

This is a disaster. There is no point pretending that Covid-19 has spared Pakistan miraculously or that we do not need to take measures against it. The question of herd immunity has already been experimented with by countries such as Sweden, and also Brazil. It ended in failure. We need to stop the misery of people, we need to end the suicides, and to do so we need to bring the Covid-19 pandemic to an end by vaccinating all our population, regardless of their income bracket and regardless of their ability to access medical care or the vaccine itself.