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## Thanks to India's neighbourhood first policy

Bhutan became one of the first countries to receive COVID-19 vaccines sent by India on Wednesday. It was sent under the grant assistance to Bhutan including Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar and Seychelles. All thanks to India's "neighbourhood first policy."

Consigned through an Indian Air Force aircraft AN32, Bhutan received 150,000 doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca Covidshield vaccine which is manufactured by the Serum Institute of India (SII).

Indian Ambassador to Bhutan, Ruchira Kamboj handed over the consignment to the government. 13 boxes which contain 1,200 vials each were sanitized and administered Thruessel by the Leytshog Lopen of the Central Monastic Body and will be stored in Thimphu for nearly two months.

The vaccine will only be rolled out after the country has the required number of doses which comes to around 1.2 million doses for the entire eligible population of about 533,000 to ensure the same level of immunity for all.

The consignment was delivered in the country just four days after India's own massive roll-out of the vaccine once again highlighting the importance that India place on Bhutan. Bhutan owes much to India and the feeling of gratitude and thankfulness towards India is always in the hearts of every Bhutanese people.

Based on the needs and requirements, with the policy focused on coop-

eration, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "neighbourhood first policy" has lent vitality to the Indo-Bhutan relationship. New Delhi has been always sensitive to Bhutan's needs owing to the pandemic as India has been increasingly responsive in helping its close neighbours, more so Bhutan.

India repeatedly displayed concern for the requests from the friendly neighbour. It ensured the flow of essential goods across the border that was most crucial for every Bhutanese.

The bilateral relations between the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan and the Republic of India have been traditionally close since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1968. Both countries share a 'special relationship', making Bhutan a protected state, but not a protectorate, of India. Bhutan is also the largest beneficiary of India's foreign aid.

Bhutan was one of the first to recognise India's independence in 1947 and both nations fostered close relations ever since.

Graciously accepting the gift, Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering thanked that it is unimaginable value when precious commodities are shared even before meeting its own needs. India's spirit of sharing and caring to Bhutan is unique. Bhutan expects same from India in the future too. Despite stark contrasts both in size and culture, this show of solidarity further emboldens the true spirit of brotherhood the two nations share, and the journey continues.

## Coronavirus: UK variant 'may be more deadly'



Early evidence suggests the variant of coronavirus that emerged in the UK may be more deadly, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said.

However, there remains huge uncertainty around the numbers - and vaccines are still expected to work.

The data comes from mathematicians comparing death rates in people infected with either the new or the old versions of the virus.

The new more infectious variant has already spread widely across the UK.

Mr Johnson told a Downing Street briefing: "In addition to spreading more quickly, it also now appears that there is some evidence that the new variant - the variant that was first identified in London and the south east - may be associated with a higher degree of mortality.

"It's largely the impact of this new variant that means the NHS is under such intense pressure."

### UK R number 'between 0.8 and 1'

Public Health England, Imperial College London, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the University of Exeter have each been trying to assess how deadly the new variant is.

Their evidence has been assessed by scientists on the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats

Advisory Group (Nervtag).

The group concluded there was a "realistic possibility" that the virus had become more deadly, but this is far from certain.

Sir Patrick Vallance, the government's chief scientific adviser, described the data so far as "not yet strong".

He said: "I want to stress that there's a lot of uncertainty around these numbers and we need more work to get a precise handle on it, but it obviously is a concern that this has an increase in mortality as well as an increase in transmissibility."

Previous work suggests the new variant spreads between 30% and 70% faster than others, and there are hints it is about 30% more deadly.

For example, with 1,000 60-year-olds infected with the old variant, 10 of them might be expected to die. But this rises to about 13 with the new variant.

This difference is found when looking at everyone testing positive for Covid, but analysing only hospital data has found no increase in the death rate. Hospital care has improved over the course of the pandemic as doctors get better at treating the disease.

### How a £20 gadget could save lives

The new variant was first detected in Kent in September. It is now the most

common form of the virus in England and Northern Ireland, and has spread to more than 50 other countries.

The Pfizer and Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine are both expected to work against the variant that emerged in the UK.

However, Sir Patrick said there was more concern about two other variants that had emerged in South Africa and Brazil.

He said: "They have certain features which means they might be less susceptible to vaccines.

"They are definitely of more concern than the one in the UK at the moment and we need to keep looking at it and studying this very carefully."

The prime minister said the government was prepared to take further action to protect the country's borders to prevent new variants from entering.

"I really don't rule it out, we may need to take further measures still," he said.

Last week the government extended a travel ban to South America, Portugal and many African countries amid concerns about new variants, while all international travellers must now test negative ahead of departure to the UK and go into quarantine on arrival.

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