

“Jawed Ashraf: How India is coping with the scourge of Covid” Le Figaro online (19/11/20, reported by Jawed Ashraf)

India, the second most populous country in the world, currently has almost 9 million people infected with the virus, but the mortality rate is low. Public authorities and civil society are being mobilised, explains India’s ambassador to France.

Like France and other democracies, India, in its efforts to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, has had to find a balance between individual freedoms and social responsibility, between national response and federal governance, and between life and livelihood. For a nation of 1.3 billion people, with some of the world’s largest and densest cities, the scale of the challenge and the enormity of the task were clear. When news of a virus outbreak began to filter through the bleak information surrounding the source of the virus, India took calibrated measures in early January, culminating in a national lockdown in late March. As the response measures began to take shape, the lockdown became less stringent from June onwards.

The cumulative number of cases in India is more than 8.5 million, or about 6,000 cases per million people in November, which is one of the lowest ratios in the world. More than 8 million people have recovered. The number of daily cases has steadily declined to one-third of the peak in mid-September. The mortality rate is at its lowest point at 1.4% in November. We continue to gradually reopen our economy and restore normal life, while remaining vigilant to the risk of increased cases. The usual strategy of screening, tracing and treatment has been accompanied by a sustained public campaign, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to mobilise the nation and society and encourage citizens to adopt responsible behaviour.

The infrastructure and capacity to fight the virus developed rapidly. Analytical capacity has grown from one laboratory performing ten tests per day in January to 2030 laboratories processing 1.2 million RT-PCR tests per day. More than 190 test kits, including 105 made in India, have been approved, the majority of which are RT-PCR tests. There are over 200 registered manufacturers for reagents and components. Newer, faster and cheaper tests will be launched in December. The number of ventilator manufacturers has increased from 3 to 25; their production

capacity has increased 15-fold. There were no manufacturers of respiratory protection equipment in India; today, more than 1,600 units are in full production. Within a few months, India has gone from a rush to imported commodities to an India that produces enough for itself and others.

When a storm hits, the instinct is to close the door and turn inwards. This may have been necessary to slow the spread and save the sick. But the way out of this crisis is to recognize the imperative of international cooperation against a threat that has erased all borders. India convened a South Asian summit on 15th March, set up a regional Covid emergency fund and training mission, sent rapid response teams and relief supplies to countries near and far, and shared essential medicines with 150 countries, including France. India has called for a concerted G20 initiative and a more effective World Health Organization (WHO) response.

Global attention has turned to vaccines. Five vaccines, three of them Indian, are currently in clinical trials in India. In our country, the preparation of the Covid vaccination strategy has begun, building on the already existing vaccination programme - the largest in the world - which covers 100 million children under the age of 5 years and 30 million pregnant women every year. The digital system that manages this programme is being developed using the Electronic Vaccine Intelligence Network, accessible to health workers on smartphone applications, using open source software and Application Programming Interface (API) exposed to ensure transparency. India will offer it to the world as a global public good. India accounts for 25% of global vaccine production and meets 60% of UNICEF's needs. Our country will play a key role in global supply. In September, Prime Minister Modi assured the UN General Assembly that India's vaccine production and distribution capacity would be used to help all of humanity fight this crisis.

France and India reflect each other in their strategic vision. Our strategic partnership is based on the mutual reinforcement of prosperity and the promotion of a stable and secure multipolar world order, anchored in the rule of law and multilateralism. The immediate and urgent call for our partnership supports a global effort to combat the pandemic. We must work together for universal access to vaccines, the development of new medicines, safe and resilient medical supply chains, a stronger and more responsive global public health system and effective multilateral processes and institutions, including the WHO.

As we strive to recover from this disruption, we must also take responsibility for shaping a more humane and healthy world.