

## Regional countries back PM Modi's suggestions to boost cooperation in South Asia

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PM Narendra Modi suggested the 10 regional countries should consider creating a special visa scheme for doctors and nurses so that medical personnel can travel quickly within the region during health emergencies. (ANI PHOTO).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday proposed five measures to prepare countries in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region to cope with future medical emergencies, including a special visa regime for medical personnel and technology-driven steps to counter pandemics.

Modi made the suggestions in a video message to a virtual workshop on the theme "Covid-19 Management: Experience, good practices and way forward" organised by India for health officials and experts from the eight members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Mauritius and Seychelles.

Representatives from Pakistan participated in a meeting organised by India after a long gap, though the country was part of a meet of SAARC leaders convened by Modi in March last year to forge a coordinated response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

People familiar with developments said on condition of anonymity that all the countries, including Pakistan, backed the five measures and proposed a structured discussion on regional cooperation to take them forward.

Barring Pakistan, which hasn't requested vaccines from India, the other participating countries thanked India for supplies of vaccines, medicines and equipment amid the pandemic, the people said.

Noting that health cooperation within the region over the past year has resulted in significant achievements, Modi said the time had come to "think of raising our ambition further".

He suggested the 10 countries should consider creating a special visa scheme for doctors and nurses so that medical personnel can travel quickly within the region during health emergencies, while the civil aviation ministries should coordinate on a regional air ambulance agreement for medical contingencies.

"Can we create a regional platform for collating, compiling and studying data about the effectiveness of Covid-19 vaccines among our population? Can we similarly create a regional network for promoting technology-driven epidemiology for preventing future pandemics?" Modi said.

Looking beyond the pandemic, Modi suggested the countries share their successful public health policies and schemes. He said India's Aayushman Bharat and Jan Arogya schemes could be case studies for the region.

The workshop was chaired by India's health secretary Rajesh Bhushan. The other countries – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Mauritius, Nepal, Pakistan, Seychelles and Sri Lanka – were represented by health officials and head of technical teams in-charge of Covid-19 management.

Modi pointed out countries in the region met the challenges of Covid-19 with a coordinated response after "many experts voiced special concern about our densely populated region". South Asia was among the first regions to come together in recognising the threat and committing to fight it together, he said.

The countries in the region created a Covid-19 emergency response fund and shared resources, equipment and knowledge. "This spirit of collaboration is a valuable takeaway from this pandemic. Through our openness and determination, we have managed to achieve one of the lowest fatality rates in the world," Modi said.

"Today the hopes of our region and the world are focused on rapid deployment of vaccines. In this too, we must maintain the same cooperative and collaborative spirit," he added.

Modi said collaboration on healthcare and medical issues could "become the pathway for greater regional cooperation among us in other areas too".

In an apparent message to Pakistan, Modi said: "After all, we share so many common challenges – climate change, natural disasters, poverty, illiteracy, and social and gender imbalances – but we also share the power of centuries-old cultural and people-to-people linkages. If we focus on all

that unites us, our region can overcome not only the present pandemic but our other challenges too.”

Modi said if the 21st century is to be the Asian century, it “cannot be without greater integration among the countries of South Asia and the Indian Ocean island countries”. He added, “The spirit of regional solidarity that you have shown during the pandemic has proven that such integration is possible.”

India has so far supplied more than 23 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines to more than 20 countries around the world and the government has plans to roll out more doses to different regions of the world in the coming weeks.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pm-modi-calls-for-cooperation-among-south-asian-states-on-medical-emergencies-101613645893870.html>