

WTO mulling intellectual property waivers for vaccines

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Ambassadors from World Trade Organization countries on Wednesday resumed discussions on trade rules protecting the technological know-how behind COVID-19 vaccines amid growing pressure on rich nations to relax them—as a way to help poorer countries fight the pandemic.

The WTO's General Council was taking up a temporary waiver for intellectual property protections that South Africa and India first proposed in October. The idea has gained support in the developing world and among some progressive lawmakers in the West.

Authors of the proposal, which has faced resistance from many countries with influential pharmaceutical and biotech industries, have been revising it in hopes of making it more palatable.

No consensus—which is required under WTO rules—was expected to emerge from the ambassadors' two-day meeting on Wednesday and Thursday.

Co-sponsors of the idea were shuttling between

different diplomatic missions to make their case, according to a Geneva trade official who was not authorized to speak publicly on the matter. A deadlock persists, and opposing sides remain far apart, the official said.

Some proponents saw more hope for the proposal after U.S. President Joe Biden's top trade official, Katherine Tai, said last month that gaping inequities in access to COVID-19 vaccines between developed and developing countries were "completely unacceptable," and that mistakes made in the global response to the HIV pandemic mustn't be repeated.

The argument, part of a long-running debate about intellectual property protections, centers on lifting patents, copyrights, and protections for industrial design and confidential information to help expand the production and deployment of vaccines during supply shortages. The aim is to suspend the rules for several years, just long enough to beat down the pandemic.

The issue has become more pressing with a surge in cases in India, the world's second-most populous country and a key producer of vaccines, including one for COVID-19 that relies on technology from Oxford University and British-Swedish pharmaceutical maker AstraZeneca.

Proponents, including World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, note that such waivers are part of the WTO toolbox and insist there's no better time to use them than during the once-in-a-century pandemic that has taken 3.2 million lives, infected more than 437 million people and devastated economies.

Opponents say a waiver would be no panacea. They insist that production of COVID-19 vaccines is complex and simply can't be ramped up by easing intellectual property and say lifting protections could hurt future innovation.

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