

Centre in war mode to combat bird flu

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Faced with an acute shortage of influenza vaccine and an impending threat of bird flu via migratory birds from China this winter, the government has started negotiations with leading vaccine manufacturers in the country to produce H5N1 vaccines on a war footing.

According to estimates, while the vulnerable population in the country is a whopping 13 crore, the availability of influenza vaccine stands at just one lakh doses.

The government's move is in addition to its plans to invoke compulsory licensing to allow generic versions of Roche's Tamiflu from domestic players Cipla and Ranbaxy, and forms part of WHO's influenza preparedness plan to tackle the bird flu pandemic in case it strikes the country.

According to industry sources, the health ministry has held talks with manufacturers with a capacity to produce up to 20 million doses and with capabilities to scale up production. This will be enough to vaccinate those who would be most exposed to the virus in case of an emergency attack.

Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech, which recently had discussions with the health ministry on this, said it is readying its manufacturing facility in view of the impending threat.

Bharat Biotech chairman Dr Krishna M Ella said during an interview with a leading newspaper, "Apart from funds in the range of Rs 50-60 crore, we would also want the government to enable us to tie up with organisations like ICMR for vaccine research. The government should also go into a mission mode, and help import the virus strains from WHO's London facility."