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A drone delivers vaccine from Bishnupur district hospital to Karang island in Loktak lake in Manipur, on 4 October 2021 | ANI Photo

New Delhi: Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya on Monday launched an initiative to facilitate COVID-19 vaccine delivery to tough and hard-to-reach terrains of the Northeast through drones.

The ICMR's Drone Response and Outreach in North East (i-Drone), a delivery model to make sure that life-saving COVID vaccines reach everyone, is in line with the government's commitment to Antyodaya' in health – making healthcare accessible to the last citizen of the country, officials said.

This is for the first time that a "Make in India' drone has been used in South Asia to transport COVID-19 vaccine over an aerial distance of 15 km in 12-15 mins from the Bishnupur district hospital to Loktak lake, Karang island in Manipur for administration at the PHC.

"The actual road distance between these locations is 26 km. Today, 10 beneficiaries will receive the first dose and eight will receive the second dose at the PHC," Mandaviya said.

Thanking Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Union Health Minister said, Under his leadership, the nation is progressing at a great pace. Today is a historic day, which showed us how technology is making life easier and bringing social change.

India is home to geographical diversities and drones can be used to deliver essentials to the last mile, he said.



“We can use drones in delivering important life-saving medicines, collecting blood samples. This technology can also be used in critical situations. This technology may prove a game-changer in addressing the challenges in health care delivery, particularly health supplies in difficult areas,” Mandaviya said.

Launching the initiative which would facilitate vaccine delivery to hard-to-reach terrains of India, the Union Health Minister said, Our immunisation programme for COVID-19 has already exceeded all expectations.

“I strongly believe that this initiative will further help us achieve the highest possible immunisation coverage for COVID-19. Incorporating such drone technologies into the national programmes would help deliver other vaccines and medical supplies as quickly as possible.

Despite the effective and safe vaccine administration in the states and Union Territories, the vaccine delivery in tough and hard-to-reach terrains of India is still challenging.

The i-Drone has been designed to overcome these challenges by deploying Unmanned Aerial vehicles (UAV) / drones to remote areas, the health ministry said.

Currently, the drone-based delivery project has been granted permission for implementation in Manipur and Nagaland, as well as the Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The ICMR conducted an initial study in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur to test the capacity of drones to carry and transfer vaccines safely.

The study was conducted in Manipur, Nagaland and Andaman and Nicobar. These studies provided promising results on the basis of which the Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA), Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) and other regulatory authorities have granted permission to fly drones beyond the Visual Line Of Sight.

Mandaviya expressed confidence in the initiative and noted that it can be helpful in delivering not only vaccines but also other medical supplies. This will help in overcoming the gaps in current vaccine delivery mechanisms, he said

He thanked the Ministry of Civil Aviation, DGCA and the Airport Authority of India for their support towards this endeavour and congratulated ICMR, health workers and all associated with this landmark initiative.

Also read: *70% of India's eligible population have got first dose of Covid vaccine, Mandaviya says*

