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Agence France Presse

Thailand to provide cheap anti-Aids drugs

Scheme will supply 300,000 HIV-positive people in Thailand and overseas with generic drugs within next two years

BANGKOK - Thailand has vowed to provide locally-made cheap 'copycat' anti-Aids drugs to 300,000 HIV-positive people here and overseas within the next two years.

The kingdom is one of the world's key production centres for inexpensive generic anti-retroviral (ARV) drugs along with Brazil and India, and has already geared up production to supply 50,000 low-income Thais living with the virus.

ARVs allow many people with HIV/Aids to extend life expectancy and maintain their health.

Government officials told the Bangkok Post that construction of a new state drug factory would ensure that ARV production would reach the target.

'We have enough capacity to give more people access to low-cost anti-Aids drugs within two years,' Government Pharmaceutical Organisation (GPO) official Isaraet Gosriwatana told the daily over the weekend.

The GPO, the state enterprise under the Public Health Ministry, can now make GPO-VIR, a generic version of three combination medicines, for 50,000 local HIV-positive people.

The drugs, which cost 1,200 baht (\$50) a month, are distributed to poor patients upcountry under a pilot project.

Cambodia and Myanmar would top the list of countries to receive the drugs.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra promised delegates at an international Aids conference in July to provide ARV drugs to other countries.

In the next financial year, starting this month, about 100,000 Thais will get access to the drugs under the universal health care scheme, according to the Bangkok Post.

Thailand supplied US\$2.5 million (\$4.2 million) worth of generic ARVs to Myanmar last month. It was the start of a three-year trial. Bangkok also supplied one million condoms worth 10 million baht to fight the spread of HIV along the border.

Thailand has repeatedly come under fire from American drug giants over its anti-retroviral programme.

The companies argue that generic ARVs break patents and deprive the firms of money needed to research new anti-Aids drugs.

Mr Amal Naj, Pfizer country manager representing the drugs industry in Thailand-United States free trade negotiations, said protection of intellectual property rights was essential to ensure the continued development of new HIV/Aids drugs.

'We have to invest US\$500 million to US\$800 million a year to research and develop the next generation of ARV drugs. It's not cheap,' the Bangkok Post quoted him as saying. 'No matter how low we bring down the price, poor people still cannot afford the drug.'

Thailand was one of six nations facing serious HIV/Aids epidemics which forged a pact promoting low-cost drugs at a world Aids forum it hosted in July.

Brazil, China, Nigeria Russia, Thailand and Ukraine forged the alliance, with the aim of treating up to 10 million new patients. -- AFP