

'Patent-owners should stand down for poor'

The Nation (Thailand)

Published on Jul 9, 2004

Aids activists yesterday called for drug manufacturers to "stand down" on patent enforcement so as to make life-saving HIV/Aids drugs affordable for poor patients in the developing world.

"We will seek out pharmaceutical companies to sign on to, and honour, our 'Treatment Access Pledge' and commit to stand down on patent enforcement in resource-poor countries," Terri Ford, director of advocacy for the US-based Aids Healthcare Foundation (AHF), told a news conference yesterday.

The AHF, the largest Aids organisation in the United States, also expressed its opposition to the inclusion of drug patents in the Thai-US free-trade agreement negotiations.

Thailand and the US began negotiations on the FTA last month, and they are expected to conclude in about two years.

"The pharmaceutical industry, the most profitable industry in the world, simply does not need additional protection on patents for Aids drugs," said Ford.

"This protection of patents would hinder generic production and further limit access to much-needed life-saving medications to the people who most need them," she added.

The group also called on the US government to expand assistance to other countries in the Asia-Pacific region under high threat from the HIV/Aids epidemic.

The US government last week announced that Vietnam will be the 15th country - and the first Asian nation - to be eligible for US\$15 billion (Bt612 billion) in Aids relief emergency funds.

In Thailand, more than 312,000 people live with Aids, yet fewer than 50,000 get treatment, Ford said.

In the first three to five years of infection, HIV/Aids patients need to pay Bt1,250 a month for generic drugs. The cost of drugs increases dramatically to Bt20,000 a month for second-phase patients due to patented drugs that are mainly produced in the US.

AHF's request will be echoed during the rally on the first day of the 15th International Aids Conference in Bangkok next week.

The AHF operates free treatment clinics in the US, Africa and Central America. It will launch its first operations in Asia - in India - later this month.

Rungrawee C Pinyorat
THE NATION