

You're trading away our lives! Voices of people living with HIV rise up in protest in Delhi

New Delhi, 12 March 2010 -- Around 120 people living with HIV/AIDS protested in front of the Ministry of Commerce in New Delhi today to call on India not to sacrifice them on the altar of a free trade agreement (FTA) with the European Union (EU).

At stake is access to affordable medicines, for them and for millions of others beyond India's borders. The country is the source of 80 percent of the AIDS medicines used in all Médecins Sans Frontières projects, and is effectively the pharmacy of the developing world. But the signing of a free trade agreement could threaten this.

"We are marching to call on the Indian government not to trade away our lives," said Loon Gangte, president of the Delhi Network of Positive People. "Lifelong treatment for people living with HIV depends on continued access to newer AIDS medicines. Because of international trade rules that India has already signed in the past, some of our newer AIDS medicines are already patented and this makes them completely unaffordable. We want to know on behalf of whom our government is negotiating."

The demonstrators carried banners chanted slogans and blocked traffic under heavy police surveillance until some of their representatives were allowed into the Ministry to put their concerns to the officials leading the trade negotiations.

"This trade agreement is the latest step in a long attack by the US and the EU to shut down India's generic industry," said Dr. Amit Sen Gupta. "India has both a moral duty and a legal right to say 'no'."

Europe is pushing India to impose greater intellectual property protection on medicines, measures which would delay the registration and marketing of generic medicines, and would extend the duration of a patent, blocking competition and keeping the price of medicines out of the reach of patients. None of this is required under international rules.

In addition, after multiple incidents of legitimate Indian generic medicines being seized while transiting through Europe to other developing countries in Latin America and Africa, the EU is now seeking to legitimise such measures by forcing India to adopt them in the FTA.

"The impact of this also stretches far beyond India. If India gives in, access to treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS and other patients will have been sacrificed in the negotiation process," said Médecins Sans Frontières' Campaigner Leena Menghaney.

The trade agreement is close to entering its final round this month, ahead of talks to be held in Brussels in April, and the EU says it wants the FTA signed before a summit in October.