

# Asean mulls negotiating with drug companies

SUN - 6 NOV 2001

**BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN.** Mon: Asean member countries will study the feasibility of negotiating with drug companies to obtain affordable prices for drugs essential to improve the quality of life of HIV/AIDS patients.

Asean secretary-general Rodolfo C. Severino Jr said today this would involve several stages, including exploring opportunities for cooperation and reviewing the experiences of other countries in negotiating for bulk purchases and differential-pricing.

"This could ultimately lead to discussions between the Asean Task Force on AIDS and the relevant pharmaceutical companies regarding more bulk purchases at the regional level," he said.

A special session on HIV/AIDS at the Seventh Asean Leaders' Summit here adopted a declaration on HIV/AIDS and a second four-year Asean Work Programme to tackle HIV/AIDS in member countries.

Severino said the Asean Work Programme is extended to all sectors, not just health, as AIDS does not only kill people but it erodes productivity, depletes the workforce, discourages investment, undermines living standards and weakens governments and communities.

Meanwhile, AIDS activists lauded the declaration by Asean to improve access to affordable drugs for people with AIDS.

Malaysian AIDS Council president Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir said both the declaration and work programme already had a significant impact in that for the first time, Asean leaders had sat together with NGOs to address the issue.

Marina said in a statement here that if all Asean member countries could come together on the issue of drug prices, they would be much more effective.

"The drug companies will have to take notice of about 500 million people in the Asean countries."

Indonesian AIDS activist Yacintha Desembri-artista said most medicines that HIV-positive people need to enable them to remain active are expensive.

"What this means is that lack of access to drugs not only shortens the lifespan of someone with AIDS, but it can also undermine the person's ability to continue working and maintain their independence.

"Once that happens, they become a burden on their families and communities," she said