

05 NOV 2001

Asean-Aids

ASEAN TO NEGOTIATE WITH DRUG COMPANIES

By: David Chelliah

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, Nov 5 (Bernama) -- Asean member countries will study the feasibility of negotiating with drug companies to obtain affordable prices for drugs essential for improving the quality of life for people living with HIV/Aids, Asean secretary-general Rodolfo C. Severino Jr said today.

He said that this would involve several stages including exploring opportunities for cooperation and review 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 relevant pharmaceutical companies regarding more bulk purchasing 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 the member countries.

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

Meanwhile, Aids activists applauded the declaration by Asean to act jointly to improve access to affordable drugs for people living 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.

She said in a statement here that if all 10 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," she said.

Indonesian Aids activist Yacintha Desembriartista said most medicines that positive people need to allow them to remain active were expensive and outside the capacity of the average person to be able to buy them.

"What this means is that it not only shortens the lifespan of someone with Aids, but it can also undermine that person's ability to continue working and maintain their independence. Once that happens, they become a burden on their families and on communities," she said.

About 1.7 million people infected with HIV/Aids are living in the 10 Asean countries -- Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

-- BERNAMA

DC RM