India to provide costly 'second-line' AIDS drugs

- VIH/Sida - Accès aux ARV et aux soins -

AFP - New Delhi - 17 avril 2007

India could start providing expensive "second-line" drugs to AIDS patients as early as next year, the country's top official for controlling the spread of the deadly virus told reporters Tuesday.

The drugs — which cost 12 times as much as older medicines — will be handed out once India has treated 100,000 AIDS patients with the cheaper drugs under its national programme, the official said.

"We have made a commitment that when we touch 100,000 we will provide second-line" drugs, said National AIDS Control Organisation head K. Sujatha Rao, on the sidelines of the launch of a global report on access to AIDS treatment.

"If tomorrow we touch 100,000, we will provide second-line to anyone who needs it."

The second-line drugs, used when the virus becomes resistant to the first-line medicines, cost 10,000 rupees (239 dollars) per person a month compared to 10,000 rupees per person a year for the older drugs, Rao said.

India, with a population of 1.1 billion people, has the world's highest number of people with HIV, the virus that leads to AIDS, with 5.7 million infected. The country began providing generic AIDS drugs through its national health system in 2004 and was treating 55,473 people through the government program by December 2006, according to figures released Tuesday. Another 15,000 are being treated by charities and private centres, said the report put out by the World Health Organisation and United Nations agencies for AIDS and for child welfare.

Indian official Rao put the current numbers on the public health rolls at about 67,000 and said that between 3,000 to 4,000 new patients were being added each month, which could bring India to its target as early as December.

Indian AIDS patients have been lobbying for the national program to include second-line drugs, for which cheap, generic versions are not yet available.

But Rao cautioned that the introduction of the new drugs must be "very steady," criticizing private health practitioners for bypassing the older drugs and immediately prescribing the second-generation medicines to patients. That practice increases resistance to the newer drugs as well, she warned.