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March 30, 2006

By Indo Asian News Service

New Delhi, March 30 (IANS) An Indian group of people living with HIV/AIDS have opposed a patent application filed by global pharma major GlaxoSmithKline for Combivir, a fixed dose combination AIDS drug on the grounds that it would make the treatment unaffordable.

Represented by the Lawyers' Collective HIV/AIDS Unit, the Indian Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS and the Manipur Network of Positive People Thursday officially submitted their opposition to a patent application filed at the Kolkata patent office by GlaxoSmithKline.

The opposition is based on technical and health grounds.

'We are objecting to the patenting of Combivir - a fixed-dose combination of the two essential AIDS drugs zidovudine and lamivudine - because it is not a new invention but simply the combination of two existing drugs,' said K.K. Abraham, president of the Indian Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS.

'More importantly, the granting of such a patent risks increasing the cost of anti-retroviral treatment for many people living with HIV/AIDS, thereby further increasing the burden on developing countries already struggling to treat patients.'

Combivir is used extensively in projects run by international aid organisations such as Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF). Almost all the Combivir used by MSF is generic.

India, Burkina Faso, Mongolia, Central African Republic, Malawi, Peru, Kyrgyzstan, Cambodia, Ukraine and Swaziland are other countries identified by the Global Fund for using generic Combivir.

'Decisions made by Indian patent offices are a question of life or death for people living with HIV/AIDS who rely on the availability of affordable AIDS drugs and other essential medicines made by Indian generic manufacturers,' said Anand Grover, director of Lawyers Collective HIV/AIDS Unit.

Last year, India changed its patent law to comply with the World Trade Organisation's TRIPS Agreement that governs trade pacts and intellectual property rights.

Three weeks ago, India granted its first patent on a drug to a Hepatitis C treatment produced by Roche.

Public interest groups are deeply concerned that this will set a precedent, leading to the patenting of other essential medicines including anti-retrovirals for treatment of HIV/AIDS.

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