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MOVE TO REFORM “CAMR” GAINS MOMENTUM
New House of Commons Bill echoes Senate proposal,
would ensure life-saving medicines reach people in developing countries

TORONTO, May 25, 2009 — Legislation aimed at ensuring life-saving medicines reach people with HIV/AIDS and other diseases in developing countries has gained momentum.

Today in the House of Commons, a Private Member’s Bill to reform Canada’s Access to Medicines Regime (CAMR) was tabled by NDP Member of Parliament Judy Wasylycia-Leis. It largely reflects similar legislation currently before the Senate, Bill S-232.

Similarly, Bill C-393 calls for CAMR to be streamlined with a simplified ‘one-license solution’ as proposed by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (Legal Network) and other civil society groups. This approach would eliminate the need for separate negotiations with patent-holders for each purchasing country and each order of medicines, providing a more workable process to get affordable medicines for people in developing countries with HIV/AIDS. Legislation created by CAMR was initially passed by Parliament just over five years ago with support from all political parties but many civil society groups have been advocating for its improvement.

“The current system just doesn’t work,” says Richard Elliott, Executive Director of the Legal Network. “CAMR was passed more than five years ago but has only been used once, for a single shipment of a single AIDS drug to a single country. The need is enormous, but it just isn’t user-friendly in its current form.”

CAMR is unlikely to be used again because its mechanism is not user-friendly and does not reflect the procurement process developing countries need to ensure a sustainable supply of medicines. Canada’s largest generic drug manufacturer, Apotex, Inc., has committed to making a formulation of a key medication specifically suitable for children and infants with AIDS but only if CAMR is streamlined.

Ms. Wasylycia-Leis’ Private Member’s Bill represents the latest step in a process which has been gathering momentum over the past months.

- The Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign mobilized in support of African grandmothers and gathered over 32,000 names on a petition which included

support for amending CAMR. Earlier this spring, it was tabled in the House by twelve MPs, representing all parties.

- On March 31, Senator Goldstein tabled Bill S-232 to amend CAMR, one week after hosting an expert panel on the matter. At that panel, the Senator's call to streamline the process received support from former United Nations Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa Stephen Lewis and UNICEF Canada's Executive Director Nigel Fisher.
- On April 1, hundreds of students and community members in six Canadian cities held awareness-raising events where they launched a postcard campaign to encourage MPs to support efforts to amend CAMR.
- Last week, on May 14, over 40 Canadian and international groups underlined the 5th anniversary of CAMR by issuing a statement, calling on parliamentarians to renew their commitment to strengthen Canada's role in responding to the AIDS crisis and other global health needs by fixing CAMR.

"Canadians are asking their parliamentarians to set aside their partisanship," says Mr. Elliott, "and use this opportunity to come together as they have in the past when CAMR was initially passed. We are asking our elected representatives to honour the pledge made five years ago. Every day counts for people who are dying without the affordable medicines they need to survive. At the moment, half of all children with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa die before the age of two because they don't have access to affordable, practicable medicines suited for children. Canada could help address this desperate public health and human rights tragedy by streamlining CAMR to make it workable."

For more information and to read the statement by civil society groups:
www.aidslaw.ca/camr.

About the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network

The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (www.aidslaw.ca) promotes the human rights of people living with and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, in Canada and internationally, through research, legal and policy analysis, education, and community mobilization. The Legal Network is Canada's leading advocacy organization working on the legal and human rights issues raised by HIV/AIDS.

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