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CAMPAIGN FOR “UNIVERSAL ACCESS” TO MEDICINES GOES GLOBAL

Efforts to reform Canada’s Access to Medicines Regime ramping up in Canada and abroad

TORONTO, March 24, 2010 — The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network is joining a global movement of legal and trade experts, activists and students, grandmothers’ groups and labour organizations. They are calling on the Canadian government to use its current leadership position to ensure greater access to medicines for AIDS and other public health needs in developing countries, notably by passing Bill C-393, which proposes to streamline Canada’s Access to Medicines Regime (CAMR).

“Canada is strategically positioned at the moment to exert enlightened leadership,” points out Richard Elliott, Executive Director of the Legal Network, “especially since Prime Minister Harper has stated that Canada wants to promote measures to improve maternal and child health.”

Elliott notes that Canada is hosting a number of key meetings in the coming days and months: Foreign Ministers of the G20 countries (Ottawa, March 29-30); Development Ministers (Halifax, April 26-28); the G8 summit (near Huntsville, Ontario, June 25-26); and the G20 summit (Toronto, June 26-27). In addition, Canada is expected to participate in upcoming meetings aimed at replenishing the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria but so far has made no commitments of ongoing funding. The Global Fund is a multilateral G8 initiative that has helped scale up HIV prevention services and access to medicines for these three diseases throughout the developing world.

The campaign to push for greater and more affordable access to medicines has recently been ramped up in Canada and in over 20 African countries. The African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation is encouraging its members to mobilize and write to Canadian embassies at the same time as the Canadian Labour Congress is launching an e-postcard campaign, holding a national conference and planning meetings with MPs to support the goal of “universal access”, which was adopted by the G8 countries at their 2005 summit.

Today, Montreal students and other community members are rallying in front of the office of their local MP, Liberal Industry Critic Marc Garneau, calling on him to support Bill C-393. Profile-raising actions are also taking place at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, at the University of Toronto and at Dalhousie University in Halifax.

“Parliament has an opportunity to pass Bill C-393 and that can be a win for everyone,” said Elliott. “It’s a win for patients in the developing world who need medicines, a win for Canadian generic companies that can supply those medicines, a win for brand-name companies that would get royalties and a win for Canada’s international reputation — all at no cost to Canadian taxpayers.”

Bill C-393, a private member’s bill on reforming CAMR, passed second reading in the House of Commons last December and is now before the Industry Committee. Since CAMR was created almost 6 years ago, it has resulted in only a single HIV drug being supplied once to one country.

Proposals to fix CAMR are also endorsed by 59 prominent Canadians, including former Prime Minister Paul Martin, former Lieutenant Governor of Ontario James Bartleman, former UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa Stephen Lewis, past International President of Médecins Sans Frontières Dr. James Orbinski, arts leader Karen Kain, environmental activist David Suzuki, and author Sally Armstrong, among others. Last December, they wrote an open letter calling on parliamentarians to reform CAMR.

Their call amplifies the opinion of 80 percent of Canadians who support the key changes proposed by Bill C-393, according to a poll done by opinion research firm Pollara for the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, Canadian Crossroads International and UNICEF Canada.

The open letter and complete poll results, along with further background, can be viewed at 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 organization working on the legal and human rights issues raised by HIV/AIDS.

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