



21 June 2002

Global health crises: Will the G8 act? Canadians call for action to save lives, condemn efforts to limit access to medicines in developing countries

CALGARY — Canadian human rights, humanitarian, development and labour organisations call today upon the Prime Minister of Canada and other G8 leaders to take immediate action on global health crises at their summit next week.

These NGOs condemn the hypocrisy of the world's richest countries. Says San Patten of the **Alberta Community Council on HIV**, "Next week in Kananaskis, the G8 leaders will declare their commitment to Africa's development, and will pledge to work 'in partnership' with African countries to strengthen health care systems and programs to fight diseases. Meanwhile, their negotiators at the World Trade Organisation in Geneva will be undermining developing countries' efforts to access affordable medicines."

While the G8 Summit is underway, WTO countries will be discussing the WTO's Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights ("TRIPS"). The TRIPS Agreement allows governments to issue "compulsory licenses" authorising the domestic production of cheaper, generic versions of patented drugs — but only if they are predominantly for supplying a country's own market. This restricts the ability to export more affordable, quality medicines to developing countries. Most of these countries must import these drugs because they lack the resources and technology to make them domestically.

At the last WTO Ministerial Conference (Doha, November 2001), countries agreed a solution is needed that will let developing countries make effective use of compulsory licensing to safeguard public health.

But Gerry Barr, President-CEO of the **Canadian Council for International Co-operation**, says that in the negotiations since then, "Rich countries like the US, Canada and the European Union are blocking solutions proposed by developing countries. They claim TRIPS gives countries choices to address health concerns. But then they try to impose strict conditions on compulsory licensing. It's immoral. It's bad health policy. Why should countries be forced to wait until something becomes a crisis or an epidemic before getting affordable medicines to sick people?"

The NGOs say the Canadian government should be embarrassed by its hypocrisy. Richard Elliott, a lawyer with the **Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network**, says: "Canada itself has been hauled before the WTO to defend our laws to get generic drugs onto the market faster. We argued then that trade agreements must allow countries to balance the private profit interests of pharmaceutical companies against the public interest

in cheaper medicines. But now Canada is siding with the US and European Union at the WTO to impose restrictions on developing countries not faced by industrialised countries. Do Africans deserve essential medicines any less than Canadians? This is a shameful double standard. "

Anil Naidoo, Health Care Campaigner with the **Council of Canadians**, agrees. "This kind of 'free trade' agreement is not 'free' at all. It should be of concern to people in developed countries as well. It undermines the sustainability of all public health care systems and drives up health care costs to the point that in Canada pharmaceutical drugs are the fastest growing component of health spending."

Advocates say the G8 leaders should provide clear political support for the export to developing countries of medicines produced under compulsory licences. Says David Morley, Executive Director of **Médecins Sans Frontières Canada**, "G8 leaders must also give assurances that future bilateral and regional trade agreements will respect the Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health adopted in Doha, which recognizes countries' right to protect public health and promote access to medicines for all. They must not push for stricter patent protection or further limit the options for countries to make medicines affordable."

Activists also urge Canada to dramatically increase funding for health in developing countries from diverse sources. Canada should contribute more to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB & Malaria, and should increase funding for health infrastructure (where needed) and the purchase of desperately needed quality medicines at the lowest possible price. "That money will benefit many more people if it can be used on less costly, quality generic medicines, another reason why Canada should be supporting developing countries in reforming WTO rules on patents," says Bob Mills of the **Global Network of People living with HIV/AIDS—North America**.

At last year's summit, the G8 leaders said they were committed to making globalization work, especially for the world's poor. But John Watson, President-CEO of **CARE Canada** says, "Health crises such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, and the lack of access to health care, are major barriers to development and to global economic growth. Globalization will not benefit the poor if G8 leaders fail to address inequities in global health."

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Endorsed by:

Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network	Médecins Sans Frontières Canada
Interagency Coalition on AIDS & Development	Council of Canadians
Canadian Council for International Co-operation	Canadian Labour Congress
Alberta Community Council on HIV	CARE Canada
Canadian Treatment Action Council	Oxfam Canada
Global Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS—North America	Trading Strategies
	World Vision Canada

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Additional materials available at www.aidslaw.ca, including:

- (1) open letter to Canada's Prime Minister on "Africa and Public Health at the 2002 G8 Summit";
- (2) info sheet from MSF & Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network on the WTO and access to medicines;
- (3) backgrounder on access to treatment and care in Africa from Interagency Coalition on AIDS & Development;
- (4) "Corporate Globalization & the G8 Summit: What do they mean to Canadians concerned about HIV/AIDS?", prepared by the Alberta Community Council on HIV.