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# India-EU deal won't hurt flow of AIDS drugs: UN

NEW DELHI: India has pledged not to curb its output of life-saving generic HIV/AIDS drugs in exchange for a free-trade deal with the European Union, a leading advocate for action on AIDS has said.

UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS, quoted India's Trade Minister Anand Sharma as promising "to ensure quality generic medicines, including antiretroviral drugs, are seamlessly available" in a news release Thursday.

India and the 27-member European Union have been negotiating the wide-ranging Free Trade Agreement (FTA) since 2007.

But UNAIDS and humanitarian groups such as Paris-based medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres have expressed fears that EU proposals for the free trade agreement could make generic HIV drugs unaffordable.

The most damaging EU trade proposal calls for "data exclusivity" which would act like a patent and block more affordable generic medicines from the market, even for drugs already off patent, AIDS campaigners have said.

But Sharma said India "rejects data exclusivity clauses in free trade agreements", according to the UN statement.

Affordable medicines produced in India have played a major role in providing HIV/AIDS treatment to people in developing countries.

UNAIDS head Michel Sidibe said in the statement he welcomed Sharma's promise made at a meeting with the agency earlier in the week in New Delhi, adding millions "will die if India cannot produce generic anti-retroviral drugs".

India's drug industry produces more than 85 percent of the first-line anti-retroviral medicines used to treat people living with HIV, UNAIDS said, while the cost of the least expensive

first-generation treatment has dropped to less than \$86 a patient annually from \$10,000 in 2000.

The drug prices are a fraction of those charged for patented medicines sold by western pharmaceutical giants.

India will seek to ensure that people living with HIV "have access to all life-saving medicines", Sharma was quoted as saying.

Some 34 million people worldwide are living with HIV, UNAIDS said.

The India-EU pact, which could boost bilateral trade to \$237 billion by 2015 from around \$92 billion now, has been held up by a series of disagreements.

The two sides are at odds over intellectual property rights in patent areas such as drugs as well as India's efforts to tackle global warming and child labour — issues that New Delhi says have nothing to do with trade.— AFP