

Lack of access to medicine in Latin America taken to rights body

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Complaints over lack of access to medicine in Latin America were brought before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on Tuesday, with demands that big drug companies be punished for preventing the sale of generics.

Various regional groups highlighted the situation to the IACHR during a hearing held in Panama, saying that 21 percent of Latin America's population had no access to basic health services and that 700,000 people died annually of preventable causes.

This should be qualified as a "crime against humanity," said German Holguin, coordinator for Alianza LAC-Global por el Acceso a Medicamentos, one of the groups.

He argued that pharmaceutical firms that block needed medicines should be punished.

"Lack of medicine can be seen for practically all illnesses," said Francisco Hernandez, Latin America coordinator for another group, Caritas.

"It's obvious we're confronted with a drama of gigantic proportions."

According to the associations, pharmaceutical groups focus research and distribution activities only on the most profitable areas.

Also, they charged, many companies use their monopoly over patents to engage in speculative pricing that keeps vital remedies out of reach of poorer Latin American patients.

And the firms deploy legal attacks against states that try to provide generic medicines at a much cheaper price.

"Something has to be done to put the brakes on this madness," said Gustavo Rodriguez, archbishop for the Mexican state of Yucatan and head of the justice and solidarity department of the Latin American Episcopal Council.

The pharmaceutical companies' efforts to maintain high prices for their products "are resulting in illness and death," he said.

The IACHR, whose headquarters is in the US capital Washington, has a mandate only to observe, hear and encourage the resolution of issues related to [human rights](#).

But Paulo Vannuchi, head of the commission's economic, social and cultural rights, unit said steps were being taken to turn this matter into a legal case, though he did not elaborate.

"There are countries that have shown courage in breaking patents with a greater right than any right over those patents, which is to protect life," he said.

Vannuchi is from Brazil, Latin America's biggest economy, which since 1999 has passed laws allowing it to ignore pharmaceutical patents to produce cheaper generic or biologically similar drugs.

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