

Medicine stocks drying up in Manipur after rebel threat

Hundreds of people living with HIV/AIDS in Manipur are hit by an acute drug shortage after pharmaceutical companies stopped medicine supplies following a huge extortion demand by separatists.

'It is very unfortunate that militants were demanding money and threatening pharmaceutical companies resulting in the firms stopping supplies of medicines. We are negotiating with the companies to resume supplies very soon and assured them of full protection and security,' Manipur Health Minister Parijat Singh told IANS.

Stocks of life saving drugs in government hospitals and chemists have dried up after leading pharmaceutical firms like Glaxo, Cipla and Ranbaxy stopped supplying drugs to Manipur after a separatist group demanded Rs.1 million in extortion money from the pharmaceutical association.

'It has been more than 10 days since the companies stopped supplying medicines to Manipur. Stocks of almost all life saving drugs have dried up,' said S. Singh, a chemist in Imphal.

The worst sufferers are the patients.

'Hundreds of people living with HIV/AIDS would simply die with supplies of drugs like Efavirenz, an Anti Retroviral Therapy (ART) drug, and other second line drugs, not available in the hospitals and pharmacies,' said Deepak Singh, president of the Manipur Network of Positive People.

Singh, currently on first line ART, is bedridden after his quota of drugs was exhausted.

'I am without ART for the last four days. There are no medicines available,' said Bimla Devi, a woman living with HIV.

The network Thursday appealed to [New Delhi](#) to rush supplies of ART and other life saving drugs.

There are 2.5 million people in India living with HIV, according to 2006 estimates released by the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO).

India's northeast has been declared as one of the country's high-risk zones with close to 100,000 people infected with HIV. There are some 26,000 HIV-positive people in Manipur, the worst hit by the deadly virus.

'My aunt was to go undergo a major surgery following an accident...but doctors said they can't operate her due to non-availability of some vital drugs. We can't even shift her outside the state as her condition is critical,' said Basant Singh, a trader.

Chemists and doctors warned they could run out of basic materials like syringes and bandages if the impasse continues.

'The situation is precarious to say the least...the government would have to declare a medical emergency if things are not settled soon,' a doctor at the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences here said requesting not to be named.

'There is no need to panic and in a day or two we shall ensure supplies of drugs,' the health minister assured.

Manipur is home to about 19-odd rebel groups with demands ranging from independence to greater autonomy.

'No one has lodged a formal complaint with the police regarding the extortion demands. But we are acting on our own,' said Clay Khongsai, a police official.

Terrified chemists and representatives of pharmaceutical companies were reluctant to speak on record fearing reprisal from militants.

'Militants in Manipur are capable of doing anything if we defy their demand. No one is willing to take the risk,' a visibly frightened pharmaceutical wholesaler said.

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