

Red Light: Shortage of Antiretrovirals in Venezuela

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ACCSI, Alberto Nieves, June 29, 2017: “The month of June presents an extremely serious situation in relation to shortage of antiretrovirals”, says the chief of the Venezuelan National AIDS Program, Dr. Deisy Matos, on occasion of a meeting of UNAIDS Venezuela and representatives of HIV civil society organizations, which took place yesterday.

Dr. Matos informed that the Ministry of Health has been negotiating an important quantity of ARV's through PAHO's Strategic Medication Fund, principally those with mayor shortage and use for people living with HIV, which, as she states, “is the only way for Venezuela to buy these drugs”. However, serious barriers came up in the 6

months since the process started: Venezuela changed three times its Minister of Health; and faced serious delays in official procedures. As a result, in May 2017 the negotiations were suspended. When finally, after several weeks, foreign currency was assigned to the health sector, most of it was employed to buy vaccines, and pay debts with the PAHO Strategic Fund and trans national generic medicine producers.

Furthermore, the chief of the National AIDS Program informs about the complexity the pharmaceutical industry faces in the production process of ARV's and logistics to ship them to Venezuela and distribute them within the country. She esteems that the process might take 4 –

6 month. It was, therefore, suggested to send partial lots in order to maintain a certain level in stock. A list of available products, indicating how many PLHIV will be served for how much time, was handed out to the participants. None of the products will be available after end of July. AIDS specialists have been informed accordingly.

As for children and pregnant women, UNICEF and PAHO have donated the necessary ARV's. Atazanavir, used by 13,000 PLHIV, will be acquired for one year with money provided by the government. A limited number of reagents for CD4 and viral load might be available in July. Substitute milk for HIV+ mothers will not be available for financial reasons and new dispositions of UNICEF, who indicate that breast feeding is not necessary when the mother is “undetectable”.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Civil Society representatives of the Venezuelan Network of Positive People (RVG+) and HIV/AIDS ONG's demanded:

They reminded the representative of the National AIDS Program that the Health Ministry has the obligation, according to the national Constitution, to guarantee the life and health of PLHIV. They claimed irresponsibility and inefficiency on behalf of the Venezuelan Government and state institutions, thus endangering the life of hundreds of PLHIV . Expressed their concern about the negative impact of shortage of ARV, medicines to treat opportunistic infections, and reagents for diagnostics, control and follow-up of HIV. In general, tshortage of medical and clinical equipment in all hospitals, affecting all those who require medical assistance.

Another discussion point referred to the incomprehensible denial of government to accept humanitarian assistance, which demonstrated that the Venezuelan State did not have the political will to mitigate the impact of the crisis, affecting thus the quality of life of PLHIV.

Civil Society representatives also demanded that the United Nation System be a voice without fear, as well as improve its technical cooperation related to the sanitary crisis in Venezuela. They expressed their concern in relation to the weakness of the response of the United Nations, which does not meet the requirements of the needs of Venezuela at this moment.

