

WORLDPOST

Right To Health, Colombia And US Congress



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Recent memos allegedly leaked from the Colombian Embassy in Washington describe intense pressure by the pharmaceutical industry and its Congressional allies to discourage Colombia's efforts to half the local price of Novartis' Gleevec, one of the leading medications used to treat Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia (CML). See Huffington Post "Colombia Fears U.S. May Reject Peace Plan To Protect Pharma Profits."

As a US citizen, as the Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia since 2012, and as a person with CML, I believe that if US citizens and members of Congress know what I know about Colombia — and about CML — they would see that these strong-arm tactics cruelly threaten human lives, and also undermine our own economic and security interests at a critical time for Colombia.

Without medication, CML — a cancer that starts in the bone marrow — kills almost everyone who has the disease. Gleevec, approved in 2001, and its successors, radically changed the outlook for CML patients, and more than two out of three people who are able to follow the current protocol of lifelong treatment can expect to achieve a normal, productive lifespan.

The yearly price tag for Gleevec is \$106,322 in the U.S. and \$31,867 in the U.K. A generic version costs about \$8,000 in Brazil. My six years of treatment have cost \$635,000 for the drugs alone, most of this thankfully covered by my UN health insurance. But, in Colombia, I am not the norm. Without government intervention, many Colombians with CML today will simply die.

Like almost all countries in the world, apart from the US, Colombia treats access to health care, including medication, as a right: the government covers the medication costs of all but a small minority of citizens who have private health insurance. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has indicated to Colombia that it must ensure that those with limited incomes have access to life-saving medicines.

As Novartis' biggest-selling drug, Gleevec in 2015 produced revenues of \$4.7 billion. Advocates estimate the material cost of producing a year's supply of Gleevec at \$159.

As our bilateral trade agreement with Colombia indicates, and as President Obama reiterated during his March 2016 visit, Colombia is one of the US's most important Latin American partners. Fifty years of civil war in Colombia have cost US taxpayers billions of dollars - and now, finally, Colombia is on the brink of a comprehensive peace accord that will end the armed conflict and create a framework for enormous social changes needed for a lasting peace grounded in respect for human rights.

We recently committed \$450 million to support the peace process, but leaked communications reported that US Congressional members have threatened to reduce this commitment if Colombia insists on purchasing generic Gleevec.

Such threats are short-sighted. Cost savings on Gleevec would allow Colombia to divert hundreds of millions of dollars to projects that ensure Colombians' basic human rights and promote the long-term economic development and stability essential for peace.

As a U.S. citizen who lives and works in Colombia and owes his life to the scientists who helped create Gleevec (Brian Druker of Oregon Health and Science University, Nora Heisterkamp, Janet Rowley, Peter Nowell and David Hungerford) and to the US government grants that contributed to developing this vital medication, I invite members of Congress threatening to withhold support for the peace process to join me in visiting the areas of Colombia devastated by 50 years of conflict and to meet ordinary Colombians, including those with CML, whose future is at stake.

The United States has a historical commitment to peace and human rights, and Colombia has a moral, and legal, obligation to do its utmost to protect the lives of its people. We have a choice: we can punish Colombia — and the individuals who suffer from CML — for striving to respect the fundamental human right to health, and in doing so, undermine Colombia's progress toward peace and stability; or we can build on our investment and promote an ethical and humane foreign policy, facilitating a human rights success story.

Todd Howland is the Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia, the commentary reflects the personal views and experiences of the author, and do not necessarily represent any official position on the part of the United Nations.

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