

Saving traditional medicines from 'bio-piracy' patents the goal of UN forum

24 March 2011 –Dozens of countries are taking part in a United Nations-sponsored effort to protect potentially life-saving centuries-old traditional medicines from bio-piracy by learning from India how to halt their misappropriation through international patents granted on non-original innovations.

Representatives from more than 35 countries wrapped up a three-day meeting in New Delhi today that discussed emulating India's **Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL)**, a database documenting traditional medicinal treatment, concluding that such a mechanism can fuel future innovation and benefit-sharing in their own nations by protecting traditional knowledge (TK) from misappropriation.

Co-organized by the UN World Intellectual Property Organization (**WIPO**) and India's **Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR)**, the conference heard from countries that are rich in TK, such as Ecuador, Indonesia, Kenya, Peru, Republic of Korea and Thailand, with speakers agreeing on the need to protect traditional knowledge.

TKDL, launched to "assert certain rights against bio-piracy," provides information on Indian traditional knowledge in languages and format understandable by patent examiners at International Patent Offices (IPOs), thus acting as a bridge between traditional knowledge information existing in local languages and patent examiners at IPOs to prevent the grant of wrong patents.

"**TKDL** gives legitimacy to the existing traditional knowledge and enables protection of such information from getting patented by the fly-by-night inventors acquiring patents on India's traditional knowledge systems," the library says, stressing that it will prevent misappropriation by breaking the format and language barrier, thus enabling patent examiners to carry out search and examination.

In a statement to the conference WIPO Director General Francis Gurry said **TKDL** is an excellent example of a technical platform which can work alongside legislative frameworks. India's **TKDL** could be a good model for others and WIPO is ready to facilitate international collaboration for countries which were interested in establishing their own systems, he added.

Closing the conference which he called "path-breaking... extremely successful," WIPO Executive Director Naresh Prasad said it had fulfilled its objective to disseminate information about **TKDL** as a model for the protection of traditional knowledge. Such knowledge is a source of innovation and could inspire life-saving medicines, he said, adding that it should also be shared and communities should participate and benefit.

"It is up to Member States to tell us if and how to proceed and where to take things from here," Mr. Prasad said, calling on them to provide feedback on whether they wish it to enter into an institutional arrangement with the **CSIR** to facilitate the sharing of the **TKDL** model.

The library notes that India fought successfully for the revocation of turmeric and basmati patents granted by the United States Patent and Trademark Office and a neem tree anti-fungal patent granted by European Patent Office (EPO). These have been used in India for thousands of years.

WIPO is a specialized UN agency that is dedicated to developing a balanced and accessible international intellectual property (IP) system, which rewards creativity, stimulates innovation and contributes to economic development while safeguarding the public interest.