

INDIA DENIES VISAS TO US RELIGIOUS FREEDOM BODY

WASHINGTON: India has denied visas for a delegation from the US government agency charged with monitoring international religious freedom, the agency said on Thursday. The delegation from the US Commission on International Religious Freedom had been scheduled to leave for India yesterday for a long-planned visit with the support of the US State Department and the US embassy in New Delhi, but India had failed to issue the necessary visas, the commission said.

"We are deeply disappointed by the Indian government's denial, in effect, of these visas," USCIRF chairman Robert George said in a statement. "As a pluralistic, non-sectarian, and democratic state, and a close partner of the United States, India should have the confidence to allow our visit," he said. George said USCIRF had been able to travel to many countries, including those among the worst offenders of religious freedom, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, China, and Myanmar. "One would expect that the Indian government would allow for more transparency than have these nations, and would welcome the opportunity to convey its views directly to USCIRF."

The Indian embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Last year, despite a much-heralded fresh start in US-India ties under Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the United States ran into problems arranging visits by the head of its office to combat human trafficking and its special envoy for gay rights. A US State Department official referred queries on the visa issue to the Indian government, but highlighted remarks by President Barack Obama on a visit to Delhi last year, in which he made a plea for freedom of religion in a country with a history of strife between Hindus and minorities.

In its 2015 report, the bipartisan USCIRF said incidents of religiously motivated and communal violence had reportedly increased for three consecutive years. It said that despite its status as a pluralistic, secular democracy, India had long struggled to protect minority religious communities or provide justice when crimes occur, creating a climate of impunity. — Reuters

FOREIGN PATIENTS TURN TO INDIA IN SEARCH OF CUT-PRICE CURES

NEW DELHI: When doctors told Australian Greg Jefferys he had Hepatitis C and the disease was destroying his liver, the devastating diagnosis was compounded by the cost of a cure. Unable to afford Sovaldi, hailed as a miracle drug, the 61-year-old flew to India, one of a growing army of patients seeking out low-cost, life-saving medicines on the subcontinent. Their illnesses vary - Hepatitis C, cancer and HIV are among the most common - but they are almost always desperate, seeing in India their only hope to save their life or that of a loved one.

Their contact underground "buyers' clubs", make the trip to India to buy from a legitimate distributor or seek out shady online pharmacies promising mail-order cures. "The doctors told me 'you've got Hepatitis C, you've probably got liver cancer'," recalled Jefferys, a PhD student. "The chatter was around the new generic versions of Sovaldi being released in India. I hopped on a plane to Chennai and in about two days I had an appointment with a specialist," he said.

India earned a nickname as "the pharmacy to the developing world" for its tough stance on patents. Successive governments have taken a view that patents should be granted only for major innovations, not updates to existing compounds - allowing domestic manufacturers to make generic versions of drugs at vastly lower cost. Sovaldi, chemically known as sofosbuvir, is made by US pharmaceutical giant Gilead and costs \$84,000 for a 12-week cycle of treatment in the United States.



NEW DELHI: This photo taken on Jan 28, 2016 shows Babu Bhai, an employee with a pharmacy, gathering generic drugs for a customer from a storeroom. — AFP

Rejected for a patent in India, generic drug makers, some licensed by Gilead, produce versions such as Mylan's MyHep, that cost less than \$900 a cycle. "This is something I observe more and more," said Leena Menghaney, who runs Medecins Sans Frontieres' Access Campaign in India, which works to broaden access to drugs. "All kinds of people and patients across the world are starting to access medicines from India. They travel themselves, or they contact a friend," she said.

More than 130 million people live with chronic Hepatitis C worldwide, according to the World Health Organization, and 500,000 die each year from related liver diseases. Since writing

a blog, Jefferys receives 150 emails a day from people in the US, Britain and elsewhere asking for help. "India's production of these generic Hep C drugs is saving thousands of lives a week."

When Loon Gangte, a Delhi-based HIV activist was diagnosed with the virus in 1997, the price of treatment was far beyond his reach. But the advent of generic Indian anti-retrovirals saved his life - and made the country a global centre for cheap, lifesaving HIV drugs. Gangte is open about carrying medicines overseas for others and says in a decade he has been stopped just once, at Thai customs, and fined. Most countries allow patients to import small amounts of medicines only for personal use. — AFP

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