

'FTAs weaken multilateral systems'

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NEW DELHI: Taking a strong stand against free trade agreements Erastus Mwencha, Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC), stated that bilateral agreements were weakening the multilateral arrangements that looked after the Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

In an exclusive interview to *The Hindu*, Mr. Mwencha said: "these trade agreements pose one danger — the weakening of multilateral systems."

"The strong, currently, want a weak system, so they can dominate the game," he added talking about intellectual property rights (IPR) being used to curtail access to medicines in poorer countries. He was speaking at concluding session of India-Africa Summit, which was themed "End AIDS Epidemic by 2030."

The statement comes in the backdrop of Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership Agreement negotia-



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tions (TTIP) and The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreements that could curtail access to affordable drugs. The African leaders have been demanding that the waiver under World Trade Organization's (WTO) Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement given to least developed countries with respect to patent protection of pharmaceutical products should be maintained until

such time that they are not LDCs anymore.

"We are not asking for charity. We need to protect the world's most vulnerable populations. It is no more about how to reach millions — it is about billions of people now. And that creates a new space for collaborating," said Michel Sidibe, Executive Director, UNAIDS. African heads of state requested the Indian Health Minister J.P. Nadda to not give in to the pressure from multinational pharmaceutical companies, in particular the United States government, and sign bilateral trade agreements that may harm the interests of patients in Africa.

Mr. Mwencha added that Western governments were lobbying for bilateral trade agreements, as it left poorer nations out of the dialogue entirely. "It is worrying that a lot of these agreements TPP, TIPP — over 70 per cent of the trade — is now unilateral. These agreements are being made outside the WTO and

then brought within the WTO ambit so that the rest of us will not have participated in shaping these agreements. When you come to negotiating table you must come with clean hands, not use the backdoor," Mr. Mwencha said.

Meanwhile, India has committed to support the fight against HIV/AIDS in the combined resolve to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030. Health Minister J.P. Nadda, speaking at the summit, stated that, "commodity security for medicines must be a major area of focus. India is committed to ensuring that the TRIPS flexibilities will be fully harnessed to provide sustained and uninterrupted access to life-saving medicines as it has proved to be a lifeline for the poor."

Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta suggested a joint India-Africa cooperation framework on HIV and health commodity security to further ensure that sustainable access to quality, affordable generic drugs for Africa is maintained.

International Cooperation