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World Health Assembly opens with counterfeit issue as part of agenda

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The World Health Assembly, the annual gathering of 193 member states of World Health Organisation (WHO), began in Geneva on May 17 with counterfeit pharmaceuticals products issue very much on the agenda of the discussion, and the involvement of International Medical Products Anti-Counterfeiting Taskforce (IMPACT) being affirmed by the world body, notwithstanding the widespread apprehensions from public interest groups.

The issue of counterfeit has been included in the agenda and the report prepared by the WHO secretariat for the discussion has reaffirmed the involvement of IMPACT as the main conduit for WHO's work on counterfeit medicines, though the organisations for health rights and many developing countries including India had opposed the initiatives by the IMPACT.

However, after the opposition by the members in the last assembly, the WHO has brought in some changes and the Secretariat had established a programme to coordinate its work to combat counterfeit medicines, including coordination with the members of the Taskforce and providing it with secretariat functions, as per the report.

"In order to assist Member States in their discussion on this topic, WHO's new anti-counterfeiting programme aims to distinguish clearly between the WHO Secretariat's activities and those of the Taskforce. Two different web sites have been established. A new WHO fact sheet has been issued. Major efforts have been undertaken to mobilize resources for the new programme," it said.

"In response to the Director-General's request (paragraph 2) for information on use of the term "counterfeit medicines" and related definitions, 55 Member States and the European Commission have so far provided answers, and a preliminary summary was presented to the Member States at an open forum held in Geneva on March 26, 2010. An analysis and subsequent inputs will be presented to the Expert Committee on Specifications for Pharmaceutical Preparations for further discussion. The Expert Committee's recommendations will be set forth in its report and the Director-General will submit a report on its meeting to the Executive Board in line with the Regulations for Expert Advisory Panels and Committees," the note for discussion at the WHA said.

The report also says about the regulatory activities across the world on the issue of counterfeit. While dwelling on the South-East Asia Region, it has also referred to the seizure of drugs from India in transit to Africa and Latin America. "Member States reiterated the importance of a public health focus in combating counterfeit medicines, emphasizing quality, safety and efficacy and separating this from intellectual property rights issues. Concern was expressed at the seizure in transit of consignments of generic medicines meant for developing countries," it said.