

Public interest groups urge US president to order inquiry into links between USPTO, Pfizer in India

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A slew of public interest groups in India have asked the US president Barak Obama to order a formal investigation into the links between the United States Patents and Trademark Office (US PTO) in India and the multinational pharma major Pfizer and to take necessary action against the officials concerned for misinforming the Indian media and the general public about its own patent laws and public health safeguards.

They also sought the intervention of the US president for giving an apology from US Embassy in India and First Secretary for Intellectual Property for associating with Pfizer as against the official policy or practices of the US PTO. The groups, in an open letter, asked the US president to take action against the US PTO officials who teamed up with Pfizer to engage in unethical lobbying practices with various stakeholders in the field of access to medicines in India.

The public interest groups' ire stems from the fact that the US embassy in India along with the US PTO had tied up with Pfizer in holding meetings across the country last year pushing a TRIPS-plus agenda in India. The meetings also raised ethical concerns with a regulatory body like the US PTO tying up with a company that it is supposed to regulate.

The meetings in India were held in Mumbai on September 9, 2009 and in Delhi on October 9, 2009 to mainly engage in unethical lobbying practices with various stakeholders. Apart from pushing for TRIPS-plus provisions like data exclusivity and patent linkages in India, the USPTO has also been actively speaking against Section 3(d), the provision in India's patent law prohibiting evergreening, a practice used by the multinational companies to prolong the patent period of drugs.

Expressing grave concern over the meetings held by the USPTO in collaboration with Pfizer to attack India's patent law and its public health safeguards, the NGOs said that even though the USPTO had officially regretted its associating with Pfizer, it has the moral duty to send regret letters to all the invitees and participants of the event. "A note on a website is not sufficient in this regard. It has to be noted that scores of public interest and patient groups as well as media persons were invited and grossly misinformed by the USPTO-Pfizer duo", they argued.

The NGOs who have signed the open letter to Obama included All India Drug Action Network (AIDAN), Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (JSA), Centre for Trade and Development (Centad), Drug Action Forum, Karnataka (DAF-K), Delhi Science Forum (DSF), Delhi Network of Positive People (DNP+), International Treatment Preparedness Coalition – India (ITPC – India), Knowledge Commons, Initiative for Health Equity & Society (IHES), Diverse Women for Diversity, All India Peoples Science Network (AIPSN), Action Aid

India, Centre for Education and Communication' (CEC), Sama-Resource Group for Women & Health and Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ).