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## World Customs Organization Recognizes Mexico For Efforts To Combat Counterfeit Medicines

by LADB Staff

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Mexico has in the past justifiably been the frequent target of complaints about violations of intellectual-property rights. But the country's steady progress in fighting product pirating has gone under the radar until recently. In late June, the World Customs Organization (WCO) presented the Yolanda Benitez award to Mexico's tax agency (Servicio de Administración Tributaria, SAT), in recognition of Mexico's successful efforts to combat the circulation of counterfeit and expired medicines. Former French President Jacques Chirac presented the WCO award in Brussels to SAT director Alfredo Gutiérrez Ortiz and Juan José Bravo Moisés, general administrator of SAT's customs service.

The award reflects international recognition of Mexico's efforts as part of a strategic plan for 2007-2012 to combat trafficking and production of counterfeit medications. In 2009, the Mexican government conducted more than 460 operations in which 38 million pieces of counterfeit medication were confiscated. The products would have obtained about US\$220 million on the black market. Gutiérrez Ortiz said SAT's operations were especially successful in the last quarter of 2009. "Between October and December 2009, SAT reported a record number of pirated goods seized by Mexican authorities: close to 668 tons of illegal products were found in 60 containers," said the SAT director. The annual Yolanda Benitez award was presented at this year's meeting of the WCO in Brussels, which was attended by representatives of 176 member countries.

WCO officials underscored the importance of the effort to curb counterfeit medications. "Countries across the globe, in particular those in Africa, suffer the scourge of being flooded with fake and substandard medicine, and this has become a matter of rising international concern," said WCO Secretary-General Kunio Mikuriya. "Information from customs administrations reported to the WCO show that in 2009 seizures of fake medicine covered more than 30 well-known brands ranging even more shockingly from malaria tablets and heart treatment medication to swine-flu vaccine." For Mexico, the recognition represents a change in the perception that the country has not done enough to protect intellectual property despite its membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In 2006, German Chancellor Angela Merkel cited concerns about a lack of intellectual-property protections as a major reason for her objections to allowing Mexico and four other countries to join the Group of Eight (G-8) nations (SourceMex, August 02, 2006).

Mexico has worked hard on strengthening protection of intellectual property and copyrights since joining NAFTA in 1994 (SourceMex, October 26, 1994). In 1999, the US government commended Mexico for its strong progress in copyright protections (SourceMex, May 12, 1999). Gutiérrez Ortiz said the WCO recognition provides further impetus for Mexico's customs system to continue improving its enforcement mechanisms. "This recognition encourages us to keep working on fighting these types of illicit activities," Gutiérrez Ortiz said at the ceremony in Brussels. Mexico

also demonstrated its commitment to strengthening copyright protections by signing an agreement with the Organization of American States (OAS) in June to collaborate in intellectual property, trade, and innovation. The agreement, signed by the Instituto Mexicano de la Propiedad Industrial (IMPI) and the OAS General Secretariat in Washington, creates protocols for dialogue and consultation on these issues.

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