

Patent law truce ends deadlock at UN body

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Rich and poor countries yesterday papered over their deep divide in regard to strengthening patents and other intellectual property rights, breaking a deadlock that had threatened to paralyse work in the World Intellectual Property Organisation, the Geneva-based United Nations agency.

The uneasy truce came after industrialised nations agreed to establish a new committee in Wipo for discussing the so-called "development agenda" being pressed by a group of developing nations, led by Brazil.

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Brazil and others in turn agreed to further talks on harmonising patent law, stalled by disagreements about its scope and objectives. The decision, formally adopted on the closing day of Wipo's annual assembly, calls for a work programme to be agreed next year after the holding of an open forum to discuss the issues involved.

"This decision will enable member states to resume their discussions," said Francis Gurry, Wipo deputy director-general, who oversees Wipo's work on patent law.

The US, European Union and Japan are keen to push ahead with an accord on technical matters relating to patent quality, including common definitions of "novelty" and what constitutes "prior art".

But this has been opposed by developing countries, which fear that their concerns - such as technology transfer, and the patenting of inventions using their genetic resources and traditional knowledge - will be relegated to the backburner. The Wipo assembly also agreed to accelerate talks on a new treaty to protect the rights of broadcasters, with a view to its adoption in late 2006 or 2007.