

■ SALE OF 10-STICK CIGARETTE PACKS

Anti-tobacco activists flay proposed extension in deadline

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Both the Coalition for Tobacco Control-Pakistan (CTC-Pak) and TheNetwork for Consumer Protection have expressed concern over the Ministry of Health's plan to get a two-year extension (from October 1, 2011 to October 1, 2013) in implementation of a Statutory Regulatory Order (SRO) seeking ban on 10-stick cigarette packs, and have termed it 'a move to allow the tobacco industry to promote its poisonous trade in juveniles.'

The tobacco industry has taken shield behind the lame pretext of lack of technology for production of 20-stick cigarette packs, an excuse which Khurram Hashmi, national coordinator of CTC-Pak, labelled as "nothing but a delaying tactic similar to last year's excuse when they expressed their inability to print the 'pictorial health warning' with available machinery, which could produce multi-colour attractive 'new packs with same horrible taste', but not a simple four-colour picture showing the associated health hazard."

Yet, the industry had to comply with the tobacco control law within the specified timeframe when the Ministry of Health refused to give in to their demand.

"It's all about the Ministry of Health's commitment to enforce tobacco control laws as promised on the occasion of World No Tobacco Day 2010 when the current year was termed as 'the year of implementation of laws.' They proved it by printing pictorial health warnings on cigarette packs; they can do it again by not giving in to the influence of

the tobacco industry," said Khurram. The Ministry of Health, it may be recollected, has moved a summary to the Ministry of Law, seeking extension in implementation of the ban on 10-stick cigarette packs.

CTC-Pak has exhorted the Ministry of Health to emulate the example of the Sindh Provincial Assembly, which has taken the initiative to ban the use of 'sheesha' in public places. "This shows the commitment of law-makers and the public towards curbing the menace of tobacco use. It shows that now the people of Pakistan have started to discourage this filthy habit in one form or the other," Khurram said. He further assured full support of CTC-Pak and its members to the Ministry of Health for implementation of tobacco control in Pakistan by not giving in to the demands of the tobacco industry to further delay the SRO. He hoped that the said SRO will come into force on October 1, 2011, leading to discontinuation of the 10-stick cigarette packs.

TheNetwork has expressed the view that after the mandatory printing of pictorial health warnings on cigarette packs from September 1, 2010, a comprehensive ban on 10-stick packs could be a vital step to curtail tobacco consumption among teenagers as the 10-stick packs are popular among teenage and low-income group smokers.

"When anti-tobacco activists are struggling to ensure complete implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), which seeks a comprehensive ban on selling cigarette sticks and small packs, it seems strange that the Ministry of Health is seek-

ing two-year extension in imposition of ban on 10-stick cigarette packs, apparently on the request of a tobacco giant. Any plan to give the extension would be considered as giving cushion to the tobacco industry for promotion of its poisonous trade," the executive coordinator of The Network Nadeem Iqbal remarked.

Nadeem said, "Drastic measures such as ban on small packs are drastically needed to curtail smoking among teenagers as 1,200 new children in the 6-15 age group start tobacco use daily." He urged the Ministry of Health to clear its position on the issue.

According to a study conducted in Karachi, 39% students had smoked a whole cigarette in their lifetime, whereas 25% had smoked 100 or more cigarettes in their lifetime. Overall, 23% students (31% male and 6% female) were classified as current smokers and their mean age and standard deviation of smoking initiation was 17 years for males and 16 for females. As many as 63% of the smokers reported that public places should be smoke-free.

Pakistan will be joining the world community in observing World No Tobacco Day on May 31st. The theme for this year globally is implementation of the FCTC, a global treaty to which Pakistan is a party. This theme can easily be locally translated to implementation of tobacco control laws in Pakistan. One can hope that on this day this year, instead of taking a step back, the Ministry of Health will take initiatives like raising taxes on tobacco products and introducing plain packaging saving the tobacco industry the cost of its multi-colour printing.