

INTERNATIONAL THE NEWS

Farmers announce boycott of tobacco cultivation

Our correspondent
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United in the stance to boycott tobacco cultivation, tobacco farmers urged the government Saturday to devise a suitable strategy that would enable them to switch over to a healthy alternative for earning their livelihood, and to tap global, national and local funding mechanisms in order to reduce their economic reliance on tobacco.

"The Pakistan Tobacco Board, which is supposed to protect the interests of small farmers, has been hijacked by the tobacco industry. We are facing the worst kind of exploitation at the hands of giant tobacco growers," Liaqat Yusufzai, secretary general of the Kaashtkaar Coordination Council alleged at a press briefing organised by TheNetwork for Consumer Protection.

The speakers were unanimous in condemning the government for being addicted to tobacco revenue; for having reduced the Tobacco Control Cell to a toothless entity, and for allowing the Pakistan Tobacco Board to be hijacked for tobacco promotion. "Our backs are against the wall. The tobacco industry, the Pakistan Tobacco Board and the government do not seem to understand the importance of the human factor," tobacco growers of Swabi stated while sharing their woeful plight.

Replacement of tobacco with healthy food crops could feed up to 20 million people and lead to a decline in the world's current 28 million undernourished people to 8 million. Hazrat Jamal, another farmer, pointed out to the need for alternatives that follow the same cultivation model as the tobacco industry. To this end, he said, "Tobacco cultivation is a labour-intensive task in which all members of a family are employed, right from cultivation to its drying in a furnace. We, therefore, need alternatives where the same cultivation model can be applied."

Ashfaq, programme manager of Community Development Organisation (CDO), identified tunnel farming as a suitable option as it enables farmers to cultivate throughout the year, and with the involvement of the entire family. CDO is working with tobacco growers to find alternatives to tobacco cultivation. Ashfaq dismissed the idea of increase in support price for tobacco, as that would give further incentives to farmers to grow tobacco.

The briefing was also addressed by the executive coordination of TheNetwork Nadeem Iqbal. Pakistan signed and ratified the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 2004. Articles 17 and 18 of the FCTC make it obligatory for parties to adopt sustainable alternatives to tobacco crop and measures for protection of the environment and health of people. Pakistan was supposed to have adopted and introduced FCTC guidelines by February 2010, but ostensibly under the tobacco industry's pressure, has conveniently missed the deadline.

Tobacco is significantly adding to Pakistan's disease burden. The situation is particularly worrisome due to the meagre budgetary allocations for health. The country is paying the worst human health and environmental costs of tobacco cultivation. Moreover, tobacco-related annual deforestation in Pakistan is more than 20%. The human health costs are increasing due to tobacco-related sicknesses among tobacco farmers. Pakistan needs to comply with FCTC obligations by understanding the human factor associated with tobacco farming. Severe health threats to tobacco farmers include bladder cancer, irritant and allergic skin disorders and green tobacco sickness. Sixteen applications of pesticides are recommended during the three-month tobacco-growing period; these cause respiratory, nerve, skin and kidney damage in tobacco farmers. Child labour in tobacco farming continues unabated in blatant violation of fundamental human rights. Children as young as 5 years are involved in tobacco farming and are more vulnerable to poisoning from pesticides, fertilizers and other injuries. Pakistan is bound under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child and International Labour Organization Convention to take immediate and effective action to prohibit and eliminate child labour.