



Farmers growing tobacco to earn fatal ailments only

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ISLAMABAD, July 21: Although tobacco is known as a ‘cash crop’, it is currently only benefiting government and the tobacco companies. The poor farmers cultivating it, however, are getting only fatal diseases like cancer, hepatitis, and kidney disorders out of it.

This alarming state of affairs was disclosed by the Secretary General of Kashtkar Coordination Council (KCC), Liaquat Yousafzai, on Saturday during a press conference held by TheNetwork – an NGO working for tobacco control.

Chief Executive Officer of TheNetwork, Nadeem Iqbal, Dr Hasan Mehmood, farmer Liaquat Ali and others also participated.

Liaquat Yousafzai said that 50 per cent of tobacco production comes from Swabi – a district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The cultivation of tobacco results in a very high ratio of cancer and other diseases in the area. Last year, 18 district constituents died of cancer.

“In the 60s and 70s tobacco companies gave us fertilisers and financial help to cultivate tobacco so much so that now we don’t even know how other crops are cultivated. Both Philip Morris and British American Tobacco companies are purchasing tobacco, and even they have an influence on the Pakistan Tobacco Board (PTB),” he alleged.

“We have been convincing the farmers not to cultivate tobacco beginning from next year, and instead go for alternative crops because we are getting nothing out of it. On the other hand, the government gets revenues of Rs68 billion annually and tobacco companies get even more,” he said.

Liaquat Ali, a disillusioned tobacco farmer, said that he has demolished his furnace which was being used to dry tobacco leaves. "Swabi is the most suitable area for agriculture, but we don't have a single cold storage in the area just because of the influence of tobacco companies. People can go for alternative crops if cold storage is provided in the area," he said.

Mr Yousafzai said: "A member of the National Assembly from Swabi, Usman Khan Tarkai, represents the farmers in the PTB but unfortunately he is also an owner of a tobacco company, a fact that prevents him from being able to protect the rights of the farmers."

Nadeem Iqbal said the PTB has challenged some clauses of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), which is a treaty of the World Health Organisation (WHO), declaring that they are not applicable in Pakistan.

"Although it is correct that tobacco is generating revenue for the government, but because of tobacco diseases, there is a heavier burden on the hospitals. By decreasing the use of tobacco, we can relieve the health sector of such high expenses," he suggested.

He said, "Pakistan signed and ratified the FCTC in 2004: Article 17 & 18 obliges parties to accept treaties that adopt sustainable alternatives to tobacco crops, and create measures for the protection of the environment and people's health".

Pakistan had a deadline to adopt and introduce the FCTC guidelines by February 2010, but ostensibly it has conveniently missed the important deadline due to the tobacco industry's pressure. During a briefing, Dr Hasan Mehmood said the country was cultivating tobacco at the cost of human health and the environment while tobacco-related annual deforestation in Pakistan was more than 20 per cent.

"Tobacco farmers are facing severe health threats that include bladder cancer, irritating skin disorders and allergies, and green tobacco illnesses in their communities. "Also, the cumulative seasonal exposure to nicotine is equivalent to smoking 180 cigarettes," he warned.

He said that pesticides should be applied 16 times, and are recommended during the three-month tobacco growing period which causes respiratory, nerve, skin and kidney damage to tobacco farmers.

"In addition, child labour on tobacco farms in the tobacco industry remains a blatant violation of fundamental human rights. "Children as young as five-year old are involved in tobacco farming and are more vulnerable to poisoning from pesticides, fertilisers and other injuries," he added.

Pakistan is bound under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child and International Labour Organisation Convention to take immediate and effective action to prohibit and eliminate child labour, he said.

Hazrat Jamal, another farmer, said that tobacco cultivation was labour intensive and all the members of the family were involved in its cultivation and drying in the furnace.

“Therefore,” he pleaded, “we need those alternatives where the same cultivation model can be applied.”

Ashfaq Ahmed, program manager, Community Development Organisation (CDO), which is working with tobacco growers for an alternative crop, said that tunnel farming is the answer as it allows a farmer to cultivate throughout the year with his whole family.

He informed that replacement of tobacco with healthy food crops could feed up to 20 million people and reduce the world’s current 28 million undernourished people to 8 million.