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Pictorial warnings on cigarette packs start

Pakistan 26th country in the world to introduce the measure

Shahina Maqbool
Islamabad

After much delay, the country's major tobacco firms, Pakistan Tobacco Company (PTC) and Lakson Tobacco Company, on Monday initiated the printing of pictorial health warnings on cigarette packs and outers in Pakistan, making it the 26th country in the world to introduce a measure that is proven to be one of the strongest defences against the tobacco epidemic.

A simple ceremony was held at the manufacturing unit of PTC to mark the printing of the first batch of cigarette packs inscribed with the graphic health warning. Tobacco

Control Cell Director General Yusuf Khan was present on the occasion to personally launch the printing process. The development is being seen as a major stride forward by anti-tobacco campaigners and public health experts.

Talking to 'The News', Yusuf Khan said, Lakson Tobacco Company has also simultaneously initiated production of cigarette packs with pictorial health warnings at their manufacturing units. "They have reported that 100 per cent of their production has been shifted to pictorial health warnings," he said. Smaller manufacturing units located in other parts of the country have also complied with the instructions of the Ministry of Health

and adjusted their production accordingly, he informed. Old stocks carrying the textual health warning have all been cleared off factory premises. The market will soon be witnessing the arrival of new packs carrying the picture health warnings.

Health Secretary Khushnood Lashari termed the development as an important occasion, as the country has now switched over from text-based health warnings to pictorial health warnings, thereby fulfilling the commitment made on the occasion of World No Tobacco Day on May 31, 2010. The cigarette industry was given a 90-day grace period to adjust their manufacturing processes accordingly.

Other countries that have introduced picture-based health warnings include Canada, the UK, Singapore, Malaysia, Uruguay, Thailand and Egypt. "Many important tobacco markets like the USA, China, Japan and most of Europe have not introduced such warnings," Lashari said, adding that "the development symbolises the resolve of his Ministry to protect and preserve the health of the populace and take bold steps in this regard."

"The pictorial health warning introduced by Pakistan is clear and strong and will be changed each year so that it does not lose its impact," said a spokesman of the Ministry of Health. In countries where significant portions of the population cannot

read and understand textual health warnings printed on cigarette packs, pictorial health warnings play an important role in warning smokers about the hazards of smoking and reducing the prevalence of tobacco, he said.

The newly introduced pictorial health warning, showing a patient of mouth cancer, covers 40% of the front and back of the cigarette pack, of which 30% is covered by the picture and 10% by the warning text. Gradually, the area covered by the picture will be increased to 50%, as recommended by the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), an international treaty signed and ratified by Pakistan in 2004.

The challenge now would be for different government agencies to curb the sale of such cigarette packs that do not carry the prescribed pictorial health warning. The Ministry of Health will coordinate with the Customs Intelligence Department (CID) and other relevant agencies to first warn and then carry out action against retailers who sell cigarettes that do not carry the prescribed warning.

An awareness campaign targeting retailers and importers will also be launched so that ultimately all cigarette packs, either manufactured in or imported for sale in Pakistan, carry the pictorial warning prescribed by the Ministry of Health.