

PICTORIAL WARNINGS ON CIGARETTE PACKS

Tobacco gurus brace for striking back

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Representatives of the tobacco industry are scheduled to meet the director general implementation of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) here today (Thursday) to demand an extension in the January 1, 2010 deadline for incorporation of pictorial health warnings on cigarette packs and outers, credible sources informed 'The News' here on Wednesday.

Rumours are also rife in health circles about the tobacco industry's intention to persuade the Ministry of Health against the use of shocking and fear-arousing photographs and to settle on graphics and images that are 'mild' and 'light' — deceptive terms, which the industry itself prints on cigarette packs to mislead consumers and to promote the false impression that brands with such inscriptions offer lower tar exposure and risk, compared to other varieties. Such terms have the potential to influence health-concerned smokers to delay or prevent quitting.

The meeting will be attended by DG Implementation FCTC and head of the Tobacco Control Cell Shaheen Masud, health education advisor Mazhar Nisar, and Abdus Sattar Chaudhry. The tobacco industry will have its point of articulated by representatives of Pakistan Tobacco Company and Lakson Tobacco Company. The tobacco in-



dusty, which is adept in the art of getting decisions manoeuvred in its favour, will understandably leave no stone unturned to curtail the losses that it is likely to incur in the wake of the bold measures announced by the government to control tobacco use in Pakistan.

The choice of photographs to be used on cigarette packs and outers is doubtlessly one crucial area where the powerful industry will demand concessionary treatment. Moreover, it will also want to buy time to be able to delay the incorporation of pictures and graphics on cigarette packs and outers. Today's meeting with the tobacco industry will be a litmus test of the Ministry of Health's sincerity towards the cause of tobacco control.

As the Minister for Health Mir

Aijaz Hussain Jakhani progresses in the direction of personally bolting the doors of the two designated smoking lounges in the Parliament House, he must also ponder over the rationale behind representatives of the tobacco industry freely interacting with officials of the Ministry of Health to impact decisions taken in the interest of public health.

"What is the need for the Ministry of Health to encourage interaction with the tobacco industry when both are working at tangent to each other," an anti-tobacco activist questioned. He continued by citing examples of numerous countries including Hong Kong, which, unlike Pakistan, have barred their ministries of health from interacting with the tobacco industry.

If the World Health Organisation can prohibit its staff from meeting persons associated with the tobacco industry, why can't the Ministry of Health institute similar curbs? In an interesting development, one of the tobacco giants operating in Islamabad has appointed its 'tobacco guru' working in Indonesia, as the head of government and media relations in Pakistan to counter the blitz of negative media and continuing onslaught of the regulators against the tobacco industry.

The decision is said to have been taken in view of the company's frustration with the waning influence of retired senior bureaucrats working for it against hefty salaries.