

Tobacco industry gains one full year to show compliance

DG health regrets but promises partial implementation by February

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The secrecy maintained by the Ministry of Health as it silently submitted to the tobacco industry's demand for relaxation of deadline for printing of picture-based health warnings on cigarette packs has given out a clear message: 'While the tobacco industry is honest to its cause, the Ministry of Health is not.'

The industry is vigorously and successfully pursuing its initial demand for grant of a 'lead time' of at least three years for printing of graphic health warnings on cigarette packs and outers, and the government is readily and obediently extending one deadline after the other to appease the mighty industry.

After the latest relaxation allowed to the tobacco industry, picture-based warnings will now appear with effect from May 31, 2010, rather than the earlier February 1, 2010 deadline notified through a Statutory Regulatory Order (SRO), and the January 2010 deadline announced on the occasion of World No Tobacco Day on May 31, 2009. As such, the industry has already gained a whole year. If the Ministry's current trend of empathizing with the industry persists, there is all likelihood of the decision not being implemented at all.

For the third time in less than a year, the tobacco industry has succeeded in buying time from the Ministry of Health on the pretext of their inability to import the machinery and wherewithal required for high-resolution printing of picture-based warnings.

The Ministry of Health grabbed global attention in 2009 when it announced several landmark decisions for tobacco control. The decision to make it mandatory for the tobacco industry to print graphic health warnings on cigarette packs and outers was just one of the measures announced on the occasion of a World No Tobacco Day seminar held on May 31, 2009. At that time, Mir Aijaz Hussain Jakhri, the then minister for health, had announced January 1, 2010, as the deadline for implementation.

The intervening period was marked by hectic lobbying by the tobacco industry, which barely left any stone unturned to maneuver a delay in implementation of the decision. The deadline was first extended by a month, and now with barely 15 days left for the industry to show compliance with the government's directive, it has transpired that the deadline has been extended once again — this time, by another five months. The revised SRO has been approved and is currently in the printing pipeline, it is learnt.

This correspondent made numerous attempts to get the comments of Secretary Health Khushnood Lashari, who is familiar with all ongoing developments like the back of his hand, but since he was on an official trip to Punjab with the president, he remained inaccessible. His absence was duly compensated by Director General Health Dr. Rashid Jooma who frankly admitted how "truly disappointing" it is for the Ministry of Health to have allowed a delay of half a year to

implementation of pictorial warnings.

Dr. Jooma attributed the delay to legal procedures such as finalisation of the SRO and an analysis of how the new law would impact other existing pieces of legislation. "However, we anticipate that starting from February 2010, you will start seeing pictorial health warnings on some cigarette packs. Tobacco companies using a simple white packing without glossy backgrounds will have these warnings printed by February, while others will follow. I assure you that by May 31, all cigarette packs and outers available in Pakistani markets will have pictorial warnings printed on them," he stated.

The DG Health further assured that technical oversight will be maintained over the entire process in the days to come. "Once that is done, we will keep a closer eye on all developments," he said.

Newly-appointed Director General of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) Yusuf Khan said: "The industry had requested for more time to import and install the machinery and infrastructure for printing of pictorial health warnings. We had to give them that time." It is pertinent to mention that the decision for postponement of the deadline was taken in mid-December when the Ministry of Health was headed by Jakhri and the Tobacco Control Cell by Shaheen Masud.

When 'The News' contacted Shaheen Masud, who is now working in the education sector, she said: "When I left charge of the Tobacco Control Cell, the

SRO had already been issued and notified. This is very disturbing news for me too. How they could have done this, is beyond my comprehension."

Speaking on behalf of the civil society, Khurram Hashmi, national coordinator of the Coalition for Tobacco Control (CTC-Pakistan), expressed shock over the development. "The civil society is shocked to learn that the Ministry of Health and the tobacco industry have secretly managed to push back the efforts made during the last one and a half years for introduction of pictorial health warning on cigarette packs. The Ministry even issued an SRO for introducing the warnings; the same is still present on its website and in the gazette."

Khurram said, "We were on board when all the technical details were drafted for implementation of these warnings. And now, they have not only backed out of their international commitment, but have ironically done so in a secretive manner. This means that implementation will be postponed time and again, and for an unlimited period of time. The step has betrayed the pro-tobacco industry behaviour of the Ministry of Health."

All eyes are now fixed on the newly-installed Minister for Health Makhdoom Shahabuddin. One can only hope that he will order an end to all clandestine moves being engineered to appease the tobacco industry at the cost of public health. The Ministry of Health's failure to withstand and frustrate the designs of the tobacco industry is surely not a befitting start to 2010.



RCCI to set up free dispensary for the poor

Rawalpindi

Rawalpindi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (RCCI) President Kashif Shabbir has said that a plan has been devised to set up a free dispensary for poor people.

According to a press release issued here on Thursday, he stated this while addressing the fourth executive committee meeting of the RCCI. RCCI Senior Vice President Syed Ali Raza Saeed Shah, Vice President Khwaja Rashid Waien and members of executive committee were present on the occasion.