

Pictorial health warning on cigarette pack**Health Minister is being influenced by tobacco industry**

ISLAMABAD: Health ministry is getting influenced by the tobacco industry as no further steps have been taken since the health minister made the landmark announcement that the government decision regarding the pictorial health warnings on cigarette packs will be implemented in letter and spirit.

Waqar Ahmed, Chief Executive Officer, TheNetwork for consumers' protection said that they had learnt reliably that the tobacco industry approached the federal minister for health and raised some baseless concerns about the government's decision on new pictorial health warnings.

The tobacco industry, however, prevailed upon the Health Minister that instead of issuing directives to the relevant official quarters to ensure that the decision about the new health warnings are followed strictly asked the ministry to come up with a presentation to allay the concerns voiced by the tobacco industry.

The lenient attitude of the health ministry towards the tobacco industry and especially no care for implementation on the decision about pictorial health warnings indicate that ministry is on the path of retraction from the earlier decision under the immense pressure of tobacco industry.

The tobacco industry is all out to block the government's decision on fresh pictorial health warnings. The basic motive behind the latest objections is to pressurize the government for the acceptance of its demand for an

extension in the January 1, 2010 deadline for introduction of pictorial health warnings.

For this purpose a multinational tobacco company with its strong presence in Islamabad has recently hired a team including foreign expert and influential former bureaucrat (earlier served as Federal Secretary Health, Commerce and Interior) to manage of government and media relations in Pakistan.

Representatives of the tobacco industry are supporting their stance by quoting international practices regarding introduction of pictorial warnings.

"Switzerland - the home of the World Health Organization - gave a lead time of 26 months to the tobacco industry, followed by the UK and Romania, which gave 24 months each, and India, which allowed a grace period of 34 months. To questions and concerns raised by the tobacco industry it is worth mentioning here that tobacco companies can and have implemented picture warning requirements in as little as six months after notifications, including Uruguay, Singapore (implementation of Singapore's second round was five months from notification), Brazil and Canada. Venezuela has just updated warnings and gave the industry 3 months to comply. Canada's rebuttal to the industry's claim that they cannot implement picture warnings quickly, including claims of limitations in printing technology, is documented in its Regularity Impact Analysis Statement.—PR