

Smuggled cigarettes causing annual loss of Rs7.4b

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Smuggled cigarette packs with no pictorial health warning printed on them are not only undermining the positive outcomes of pictorial health warnings made mandatory in Pakistan from September 1, 2010 onwards, but are also causing a huge annual loss of Rs7.4 billion to the national exchequer in terms of tax collection, states a research study released by TheNetwork for Consumer Protection on the eve of World No-Tobacco Day here on Monday.

Titled 'Tracing Illicit Tobacco Trade in Pakistan' the report is part of a regional report 'Tracing Illicit Tobacco Trading in South Asia' released by the Framework Convention Alliance and Health Bridge. "Immediate measures on part of the government are drastically needed to control smuggling of cigarettes in and through Pakistan as the illicit tobacco trade in Pakistan is reportedly 20 percent of the total cigarette market," the report warns, adding that the figure

could be even higher.

The report's finding that at present more than 30 foreign brands including Afghani, American, British, European, German, Greek, Korean and Middle Eastern cigarettes are available in most retail cigarette shops across the country is an eye-opener for the authorities concerned. The major routes of cigarette smuggling are the Afghan transit trade through Torkham and Chaman borders. "Each 20-foot container used for cigarette smuggling can carry around 700 master cases of 10,000 cigarette sticks (in total around 7 million sticks) while a 40-foot container can carry 1,000 master cases. A carton normally contains 50 boxes of 10 packs of cigarettes while the small carton carries 25 boxes of 10 packs," the report finds. In a market near Peshawar, over three 20-foot containers arrive in a month. According to the report, the figure could go higher if containers smuggled through Chaman border are included.

Tobacco use is among the four major risk factors con-

tributing to the epidemic of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) including cerebro-vascular diseases, diabetes, cancer and chronic lung disease. NCDs kill three out of five people or 36 million people annually. Thirty percent of the deaths resulting from NCDs are of people aged less than 60, and nearly 80 percent of those deaths occur in developing countries.

The WHO FCTC is the world's answer to the tobacco epidemic. It obliges parties to take incremental action against tobacco consumption, marketing and exposure, among many other measures. World No Tobacco Day 2011 highlights the critical importance of ensuring full implementation of the WHO FCTC within all countries. 'Ban on the illicit trade in tobacco products,' being the basic guideline of the FCTC, has special significance for Pakistan and it is the time for anti-tobacco activists to boost efforts to ensure a comprehensive ban on smuggled cigarettes so that the dream of tobacco-free Pakistan could be realised.

Almost a decade since the 'Prohibition of Smoking and Protection of Non-smokers Health Ordinance 2002' was promulgated and six years since the WHO 'Framework Convention on Tobacco Control' (FCTC) was ratified, the enforcement of these legal frameworks remains a challenge for Pakistan as the tobacco industry continues to find loopholes to earn huge profits from tobacco sales.

On May 31 this year, 'World No Tobacco Day' is being celebrated with the theme 'The WHO FCTC', an international accord ratified by 62 countries. It is a time for Pakistan to implement all guidelines of the FCTC to stem consumption of tobacco. No consumer product kills as many people and as needlessly as does tobacco.

TheNetwork believes that if the Health Ministry is devoted, the implementation of FCTC by the provinces will become particularly challenging, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which is the biggest producer of quality tobacco.