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What should they grow, if not tobacco?



ISLAMABAD - Small tobacco growers said on Saturday that the federal government's Tobacco Board that had been captured by tobacco industry and big tobacco growers were exploiting them, but they had no alternative but to grow this crop. This was stated by Kashtkaar Coordination Council Secretary General Liaqat Yousufzai while addressing a press conference, organised by The Network for Consumer Protection, an NGO working for tobacco control. Speaking on the occasion, The Network Executive Director Nadeem Iqbal said that the federal government was adopting double standards by having toothless Tobacco Control Cell to control tobacco use and, on the other, having Pakistan Tobacco Board for tobacco promotion under the guise of protecting small farmers' interest.

He said Pakistan had signed and ratified international public health treaty with the World Health Organisation (WHO), The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 2004. "Article 17 and 18 of FCTC oblige parties to treaties to adopt sustainable alternatives to tobacco crop and measures for the protection of environment and health of people," he added. Pakistan had a deadline to adopt and introduce FCTC guidelines by February 2010, but, ostensibly, under the tobacco industry's pressure, Pakistan has conveniently missed the important deadline.

Speakers at the press conference condemned the recent statements of an official of Pakistan Tobacco Board, saying that there was no ambiguity in FCTC and the government should realise that tobacco was adding a lot to the disease burden that could not be borne by the meager budgetary allocations for health. "The country is paying the worst human health and environmental cost of tobacco cultivation. Tobacco-related annual deforestation in Pakistan is more than 20% and human health cost is increasing due to the growing tobacco-related sicknesses in tobacco farmers' community.

Pakistan needs to comply with obligations to FCTC by understanding the human factor associated with tobacco farming. Severe health threats to tobacco farmers include bladder cancer and irritant and allergic skin disorders and green tobacco sickness are commonly observed in tobacco growers' community in Pakistan. Also the cumulative seasonal exposure to nicotine equivalent to smoking

goes by at least 180 cigarettes,” they said. They added 16 applications of pesticides were recommended during three-month tobacco growing period that caused respiratory, nerve skin and kidney damage in tobacco farmers.

On the other hand, child labour in tobacco farming remains a blatant violation of fundamental human rights by tobacco industry. “Children as young as 5 years old are involved in tobacco farming and are move vulnerable to poisoning from pesticides, fertilizers and other injuries. Pakistan is bound under United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child and International Labour Organisation Convention to take immediate and effective action to prohibit and eliminate child labour,” they observed. Hazrat Jamal, another farmer, said that tobacco cultivation is labour intensive and all the members of a family are involved in its cultivation and drying in furnace. Ashfaq, Programme Manager, Community Development Organisation (CDO) working with tobacco growers for alternative tobacco crop, says that tunnel farming is the answer as under it a farmer can cultivate throughout the year and his whole family is also involved.

He also said that raising support price for tobacco is not an answer to the issue as raising price will give more incentive to farmers to grow tobacco which jeopardize the food security as farmer will not be growing wheat or vegetable. Tobacco growers of Sawabi (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) urged the government to devise and support global, national and local funding mechanisms to assist tobacco farmers to reduce their economic reliance on tobacco and move toward healthy alternatives to tobacco crop. –

See more at: <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2012/07/22/city/islamabad/what-should-they-grow-if-not-tobacco/#sthash.AlnH68z3.dpuf>