

‘Govt not serious about reducing tobacco’

Growers say PTB supporting companies instead of farmers.

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Growers say PTB supporting companies instead of farmers. PHOTO: FILE

ISLAMABAD:

Tobacco is a cash crop for the government and multinational tobacco companies but not for its growers. Its cultivation is posing serious health risks to them, damaging the environment, encouraging child labour and causing severe food insecurity.

This was said by a group of tobacco growers from Swabi, led by Kaashtkaar Coordination Council Secretary General Liaqat Yusufzai at press conference organised by The Network for Consumer Protection on Saturday at the National Press Club.

They expressed concern that the Pakistan Tobacco Board (PTB), which is meant to support tobacco farmers, is promoting and supporting tobacco companies instead.

They condemned recent statements made by a PTB official, saying there is no ambiguity in the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) and that the government, which is addicted to tobacco revenue, should realize that tobacco is adding to the disease burden that cannot be borne by the meagre budgetary allocations for health.

“We do not want to grow tobacco as we know the federal government’s Tobacco Board has been captured by the tobacco industry and big tobacco growers are exploiting us, but we do not have an alternative,” says Liaqat Yusufzai.

“Due to poverty we are forced to make our children work in tobacco fields,” he added. The 16 rounds of pesticides used during the three-month tobacco growing period can cause respiratory, nerve, skin and kidney damage to farm workers.

He claimed that tobacco growers will start a tobacco boycott campaign under which none of its grower will grow it.

The growers also demanded that the government intervene and devise global, national and local funding mechanisms to help tobacco farmers move to alternative crops.

The Network Executive Director Nadeem Iqbal said the federal government had a double standard as its “toothless Tobacco Control Cell” conflicted with the PTB which promotes tobacco growing “under the guise of protecting small farmers’ interest”.

Community Development Organisation Program Manager Ashfaq said raising the support price for tobacco is not the answer as raising the price will give more incentive to farmers to grow tobacco, which jeopardises food security as more farmers will turn to tobacco instead of grain or vegetable.

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