

Sunday, July 22, 2012

## **PTB exploits farmers : Tobacco growers seek govt assistance for alternate crop**

*Staff Report*

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Tobacco Board (PTB) instead of helping tobacco farmers is promoting and supporting tobacco companies.

Government did not seem to understand the importance of human factor as tobacco companies and PTB were exploiting tobacco growers.

"We do not want to grow tobacco as we know PTB has been captured by tobacco industry and big tobacco growers are exploiting us", said Liaquat Yusufzai, Secretary General Kaashtkaar Coordination Council (KCC).

Pakistan has signed and ratified international public health treaty by World Health Organisation, The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 2004. Article 17 and 18 of FCTC obliges parties to treaties to adopt sustainable alternatives to tobacco crop and measures for the protection of environment and health of people.

Yusufzai addressing a press conference organised by TheNetwork for consumer protection, working for tobacco control said 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.

Nadeem Iqbal, Executive Director of TheNetwork said the federal government was having double standards by having toothless Tobacco Control Cell to control tobacco use and on the other having PTB for tobacco promotion under the guise of protecting small farmers interest.

Speakers at the press conference condemned the recent statements of an official of PTB, saying there was no ambiguity in FCTC and the government, which was addicted to tobacco revenue should realise that tobacco was adding 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 percent and human health cost increases due to growing tobacco related sicknesses in tobacco farmers' community.

Pakistan needs to comply with obligations to FCTC by understanding the human factor associated to tobacco farming. Severe health threats to tobacco farmers include bladder cancer and irritant and allergic skin disorders and green tobacco sickness is commonly observed in tobacco growers' community in Pakistan. Also the cumulative seasonal exposure to nicotine is equivalent to smoking goes by at least 180 cigarettes.

Around 16 applications of pesticides are recommended during three month tobacco growing period that causes respiratory, nerve skin and kidney damage in tobacco farmers.

Child labour in tobacco farming remains a blatant violation of fundamental human rights by tobacco industry.

Children even 5 years old are involved in tobacco farming and are more 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.

Hazrat Jamal, a farmer said tobacco cultivation is intensive and all the members of a family are involved in its cultivation and afterward drying in furnace. Therefore, we need those alternate where the same cultivation model can be applied.

Ashfaq, Programme Manager Community Development Organisation (CDO), which is working with tobacco growers for alternative tobacco crop said tunnel farming was the answer as under it a farmer could cultivate through out the year and his whole family also involved.

He informed there has been successes in tunnel farming and many tobacco farmers have opted for alternative safe farming.

He said raising support price for tobacco was not an answer to the issue as raising price would give more incentive to farmers to grow tobacco which jeopardise the food security as farmer would not be growing wheat or vegetable.

Tobacco growers of Swabi (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) demand government to intervene devise and support global, national and local funding mechanisms to assist tobacco farmers to reduce their economic reliance on tobacco and move towards a healthy alternative of tobacco crop. It is evident from different researches that replace of tobacco with healthy food crops could feed up to 20 million people and reducing the world's current 28 million undernourished people to 8 million.