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■ OFFER OF INCENTIVES TO CONSUMERS BY TOBACCO FIRMS

Tobacco Control Cell serves notice to a company

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Islamabad

Setting the first example of its kind, the Tobacco Control Cell of the Ministry of Health Tuesday issued a show cause notice to a tobacco company, allegedly violating the country's tobacco control laws.

The show cause notice has been issued to Lakson Tobacco Company, one of the two largest manufacturers of cigarettes in Pakistan, on violation of the law that forbids offer of any form of incentive to consumers for promotional purposes.

The legal notice has sought a reply from the company for offering incentives in the form of filled cigarette packets in exchange for empty boxes, giving cigarette lighters on low prices, and giving metal cigarette containers which will cause the newly-launched pictorial health warnings to be hidden.

Talking to 'The News', an official of the Ministry of Health said that under the law, no tobacco firm can offer any form of incen-

tive to a consumer in the form of goods, cash rebates or discount. An SRO in this regard was issued in July last year to prohibit incentives that are offered purely for promotional purposes.

Sources in the Ministry of Health confided to 'The News' that in case the reply tendered by the firm is not tenable, legal action will be contemplated; this will be the first time any such stringent measure in terms of implementation of laws will be taken. So far, legal action has only been restricted to individuals breaking the law, with penalties in the shape of fine for smoking in public transport or public places.

This is the first time that the Ministry of Health has moved against tobacco manufacturers for violating the country's tobacco control regulations. "Unless action is initiated at the top level and a clear message is sent out that we mean business, laws will continue to be flouted with impunity," an official of the ministry remarked.

According to the notice, the

firm has been asked to explain its position on three counts namely, i) Free packs of a certain brand manufactured by the firm is being offered by the company free of charge in exchange for one or two cigarettes of another brand. ii) Free metal boxes were being offered by the firm upon purchase of a few packs of cigarettes and iii) Free lighters of a particular brand were being offered by the firm upon purchase of a few packs.

The Director General Tobacco Control Yusuf Khan confirmed the issuance of the legal notice, saying that in the past, the Cell has been criticised for not moving against violations by the industry. "We are making implementation of the laws on ground stronger as this was the grey area and more action on the ground will be seen in the days to come," he said, adding "framing rules and laws is only a job half done and we intend to move fast on first creating awareness about the anti-tobacco laws and then ensuring their strict implementation.

The provincial governments have also been requested to gear up their efforts. Secretary Health Khushnood Lashari has recently written to the chief secretaries of the provinces, asking them to focus their attention on enforcement of tobacco control laws and to avail the assistance and support that the Tobacco Control Cell can provide to create awareness about the hazards of tobacco use and the enforcement of tobacco control laws.

In view of the growing epidemic of smoking among youth, the ministry has written to Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority to use its muscle in stopping 'incidental advertising' of tobacco products and depiction of smoking in TV dramas and programmes as this is not only a violation of the anti-tobacco law but also lures young people into the habit of smoking as they emulate television stars and personalities. "A letter in this regard was sent to Pemra by Secretary Health on June 11, and action in this regard is awaited," confirmed Yusuf Khan.