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## Health Ministry yet to fulfil pledge

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ISLAMABAD - Health Ministry's pledge to implement pictorial health warnings on cigarette packs seems in doldrums, as ministry due to the mounting pressure of the tobacco industry is taking no further steps to execute the decision in letter and spirit.

Tobacco Industry approach to the high ups of Health Ministry and its baseless concerns about the government's decision on new pictorial health warnings are being seen as threats to the effective implementation of the landmark verdict.

The tobacco industry, however, prevailed upon the Health Minister that instead of issuing directives to the relevant official quarters to ensure that the decision about the new health warnings are followed strictly asked the ministry to come up with a presentation to allay the concerns voiced by the tobacco industry.

The lenient attitude of the health ministry towards the tobacco industry and especially no care for implementation on the decision about pictorial health warnings indicate that ministry is on the path of retraction from the earlier decision under the immense pressure of tobacco industry, said Waqar Ahmad Chief Executive Officer, TheNetwork for Consumer Protection.

"The tobacco industry is all out to block the government's decision on fresh pictorial health warnings and the basic motive behind the latest objections is to pressurize the government for the acceptance of its demand for an extension in the January 1, 2010 deadline for introduction of pictorial health warnings", he continued.

He said, "representatives of the tobacco industry are supporting their stance by quoting international practices regarding introduction of pictorial warnings in a long time". Tobacco companies can and have implemented picture warning requirements in as little as six months after notifications. "The tobacco industry apprehension that the introduction of pictorial warnings will give a boost to the illegitimate cigarette is mislaid as the warning will make legal packs stand out much more", he added.

"They will help illegal packs without warnings to be more easily identified as such", he further added. He was of the view that if the World Health Organization can prohibit its staff from meeting persons associated with the tobacco industry then why can't the Ministry of Health institute similar curbs?, TheNetwork for consumer protection appealed to the ministry not to step back from its decision of implementing the pictorial health warnings on the cigarette packs. TheNetwork also stressed that there is no need for the Ministry of Health to encourage interaction with the tobacco industry when both are working at tangent to each other. It is worth mentioning here that Pakistan is a signatory of WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), which obligates her to use large, clear, visible and legible warnings on packs of tobacco and their outside packing.

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