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2008 'worst year for tobacco control in Pakistan'

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By by Shahina Maqbool
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The Coalition for Tobacco Control (CTC-Pakistan) has termed 2008 as the worst year for tobacco control in Pakistan.

Talking to 'The News' here on Thursday, the Coordinator of CTC Pakistan, Khurram Hashmi said, "The only success story we have had during 2008 is a raise in tobacco taxes — that too nominal. The tobacco industry, on the other hand, is fiercely engaged in organising campaigns in the name of public health, the latest examples being the holding of a blood donation camp in collaboration with the Pakistan Red Crescent Society right in the heart of the capital city and a one-day free medical camp in district Swabi, which was praised by NWFP's minister for social welfare and women development."

Khurram said, the civil society has feasted their eyes on new year with high hopes for a better response from the government in tobacco control "but there has been little development in implementing the tobacco control ordinance," he regretted. "So far, we have not only delayed the introduction of a new set of rotational health warnings from January 2009 to June 2009, but have also allowed designated smoking areas in the country," Khurram said.

The CTC coordinator emphasised that Pakistan is a high priority country when it comes to tobacco control, and with the rest of the countries in its region introducing new mediums to contain the tobacco epidemic, "it is about time we should consider where we stand" in relation to implementation of the guidelines adopted by the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), which held its third session (COP-3) in Durban, South Africa, in November 2008.

Reflecting on these guidelines, Khurram said, "They aim to assist parties in meeting their obligations and ensuring protection of tobacco control from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry." At COP-3, three very strong guidelines were adopted by countries throughout the world regarding protection of public health policies from tobacco industry interference, packaging and labelling of tobacco products and their advertising, promotion and sponsorship otherwise known as article 5.3, 11 and 13, respectively.

"With the Article 8 Guidelines (protection from exposure to tobacco smoke) adopted by COP2 in Thailand, we now have a total of four guidelines that can assist in our advocacy efforts at the national level since Pakistan is a party in the FCTC treaty," said Khurram.

Khurram asserted that with the dawn of new year, Pakistan should recognise that there is a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between the tobacco industry's interests and public health policy interests, and the guidelines provide detailed recommendations on measures that Parties should take. "Interactions with the tobacco industry should be strictly restricted to enable effective regulation of the industry and its products. The government should ensure that any necessary interactions with the industry shall be transparent as defined by the Article 5.3 guidelines," the CTC coordinator asserted.

Reflecting on what needs to be done, Khurram said, "The Coalition For Tobacco Control-Pakistan suggests a strategy, which not only protects against any conflicts of interest for those involved in implementing tobacco control policies, including prohibition of acceptance of any services from the industry, but also providing public access to a wide range of information on these activities."

Khurram hoped that the newly appointed Secretary for Health Suleman Ghani, will pay particular attention to enforce effective implementation of tobacco control policies in favour of public health," Khurram said in the backdrop of Thursday's presentation made to the secretary by the tobacco industry to plead its case in favour of creation of designated smoking areas at public places.