

Daily Times

Islamabad | Peshawar

Your Right to Know

Islamabad | Shawwal 1, 1430 | Monday

Tobacco lobby may force govt to delay pictorial warning on packs

■ Tobacco industry contends it cannot print warnings within six months and quotes examples of Switzerland, UK, Romania and India, which took more than two years to publish the pictorial warnings

By Sajjad Malik

ISLAMABAD: The cash-rich and well-connected "tobacco lobby" may force the government to delay its decision to carry pictorial health warnings on cigarette packs, sources in the Health Ministry said.

The government on 'World No Tobacco Day' on May 31 announced introduction of pictorial health warnings on cigarette packs and gave the industry a six-month deadline to print them from January 1, 2010.

However, soon after the announcement the tobacco industry's bigwigs became active and held a number of meetings with the high-ups of Health Ministry to reverse or delay the implementation of pictorial warnings.

The ministry has started work on legislation for introduction of warnings on cigarette packs in consultation with the Ministry of Law but the tobacco lobby is trying to delay the process.

The industry contended that it could not print the warnings within six months and quoted examples of

Switzerland, UK, Romania and India, which took more than two years to publish the pictorial warnings.

But they forgot the example of Venezuela and Chile where the decision was implemented in three months. Canada did it in six months.

The picture-based health warnings are particularly significant for countries like Pakistan with poor literacy rate and inadequacy of resources for public health education, and where majority of the people cannot decipher text-based warnings and remain oblivious to the deleterious consequences of tobacco use.

By introducing pictorial warnings, Pakistan would join 30 countries having similar warnings. Pakistan is signatory to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), which binds its more than 160 countries to use large, clear, visible and legible warnings on packs and outer packaging.

It recommends that these warnings should cover 50% or more of the principal display area but not less than 30% of it.

The key objectives of pictorial health warnings are to inform the consumers of the harmful effects of tobacco and to reduce consumption.

Studies show that smokers are not aware of or underestimate the health effects of tobacco use. Real-world evidence from Canada and Singapore substantiates the usefulness of picture-based warnings to influence its consumers to quit.

Spokesman for Pakistan Tobacco Company (PTC) Asim Imdad Ali rejected the impression that tobacco lobby was trying to delay the decision and said they had no problem with the pictorial warnings.

However, he confirmed that tobacco industry had asked for 18-month time to print the warnings, but government asked it to do it in six months.

"We had a meeting with Minister for Health Ijaz Jhakarani on July 28 and asked for 18 months but it was decided that it should be done within six months.

We have accepted it and we have no problem. It is up to the government to introduce the law on pictorial warnings and we will do it," he said.