

Printing of pictorial warnings on cigarette packs Delay in implementation raises concerns

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ISLAMABAD - The extension granted time and again by the Ministry of Health to the tobacco industry in the deadline for implementing pictorial health warnings on cigarette packs is raising speculations among the concerned quarters.

Earlier, the Ministry announced on May 31st, 2009 that health warnings will come into effect from January 1, 2010 and tobacco industry was given a time period of six months to comply with the amendments.

It was decided that the display area for picture based warnings will be not less than 50 percent on the cover and outer of cigarette packs.

Reacting to the decision, the tobacco lobby became active and started influencing the policymakers. Thus the January 1st deadline for printing

pictorial warning was delayed for a month and the industry was given relaxation of a month and was asked to implement the decision after a month.

Not only has the deadline been extended to May 31st, 2010 but the tobacco industry is allowed to have its say on all aspects of pictorial warnings.

Under the treaty called Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) drafted under the aegis of World Health Organization (WHO) and adopted by World Health Assembly in 2003, it is mandatory for 168 signatory countries to implement its recommendations including pictorial warnings.

Pakistan ratified the FCTC on November 3, 2004, binding itself into legal obligations enshrined in the framework convention. But one of the major provisions of FCTC regarding

pictorial warnings on cigarette packs remains unimplemented in Pakistan due to delay in the implementation of the decision.

Health experts believe that printing of health warnings would go a long way in eliminating smoking from the country, as most of the people are illiterate and hence unable to read to prevalent written warning.

Whereas the Ministry has also failed to come up with the amendments announced to be brought into the Printing of Warning Ordinance 1979 to incorporate pictorial health warning into domestic law.

Dr Arif Azad, Executive Coordinator of TheNetwork for Consumer Protection criticising the delay said, "What we had feared all along has come true. After such fanfare of introducing pictorial warning by 1st January has been put back

to May 31, 2010.

It seems tobacco industry has been given a too much of a say over the pace and direction of implementation process of pictorial warning. Pictorial warnings on cigarette packs are central to reduce tobacco consumption in a country like Pakistan where literacy rate is very low.

International studies have shown the efficacy of pictorial warnings. According to independent statistics, everyday 273 people die of tobacco related causes in Pakistan. The more delay means more preventable tobacco deaths. We appeal to the Health Ministry to implement pictorial warnings deadline by 1st February 2010."

It is also being feared that this delay could be precursor to another delay as has happened with past deadlines.