

Ministry clarifies news on pictorial health warnings

Islamabad

With reference to a news item published in 'The News' issue of January 15, 2010, titled 'Tobacco industry gains one full year to show compliance', it is stated that the story contains a number of factual errors, which do not represent the true picture and attempts at belittling the leading role of Pakistan as an anti-tobacco campaigner in the world, says a press release issued here on Friday by the Ministry of Health.

Pakistan took a lead few years back when it became one of the forty countries to sign and ratify the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Pakistan was one of the first countries in the world to place restrictions on tobacco advertising with the result that no tobacco promotion on electronic media, print media and outdoor media existed in the country.

The country was one of the few in the world disallowing tobacco use in public areas, transport including air, land and railways.

In Pakistan of late, the designated smoking areas in restaurants and public places were disallowed. Despite the fierce resistance by the powerful tobacco industry, the Ministry of Health did not budge from its decision in this regard and the SRO on designated smoking areas was withdrawn.

It may be mentioned that the country's present leadership had taken the lead by declaring the Aiwan-e-Sadr and Prime Minister House smoke-free.

With regard to the pictorial health warnings to be placed onto the cigarette packs, it is to bring to the knowledge of the readers that Pakistan is amongst the first 23 countries in the world to go for these warnings out of 195 members of the United Nations. The country is also one of the largest tobacco markets in the world besides one of the few in Asia to do so. After India, with 1.2 billion and Brazil with 186 million population, the country is the third largest tobacco market to introduce pictorial warnings globally and 9th in Asia.

With regard to 'lead time' given to the tobacco industry as mentioned in the story, it is stated that a total of 7 months 'lead time' was given to the industry which is the second shortest 'lead time' after Venezuela.

The notification was issued on November 3, 2009, and the implementation was to begin from May 31, 2010. It may be mentioned that in advanced countries of Europe, the EU had given 2-year 'lead time,' whereas 39 months of 'lead time' was given by the Government of the United States despite a strong healthcare systems in that country. Not to mention neighbouring India, which had given 34-month 'lead time' for compliance.

Regarding the change of date of implementation as referred to in the story, it is stated to set the record straight that the tobacco industry had filed a petition before the competent authority in the Ministry of Health citing reasons for which implementation on ground would not be possible by February 1, 2010.

The industry had sought two-year time to allow for import and installation of state-of-the-art machinery to print pictorial warnings on cigarette packets and exhaustion of existing stocks in the market with textual health warnings.

The Ministry of Health in response to the petition rejected all arguments of the tobacco industry for grant of two-year 'lead time' despite excessive pressure and influence that was brought to bear upon it.

It may be added that had the ministry not acted wisely, the tobacco industry could have sought legal recourse as stated in its petition, entangling the industry and the ministry in a legal battle that would have resulted in further delay in implementation of the much-awaited pictorial health warnings.

In the final analysis, it may be stated that due credit needs to be given to the country for marching ahead in the global fight against tobacco consumption. Where we make a strenuous effort to point out the vices, we could also count a few virtues.

Shahina Maqbool adds: The story is not an attempt at belittling Pakistan's role as an anti-tobacco campaigner. Its contents can best be described as reflecting the media's watchdog function. The story draws attention to the harm that the Ministry of Health has inflicted on its own reputation as an anti-tobacco campaigner by not fulfilling the commitments, which it made on the occasion of World No Tobacco Day on May 31, 2009.

Even though the story does not question the government's role in placing tobacco advertising restrictions and imposing a ban on smoking in public places and transport, the fact is that all these restrictions are openly and repeatedly being flouted because of the non-existence of a robust implementation mechanism and the financial and human resource constraints facing the Tobacco Control Cell of the Ministry of Health.

Similarly, in spite of withdrawal of the SRO on designated smoking areas, their existence is yet to become a phenomenon of the past. The beauty of all laws lies in their implementation.

The Ministry of Health wants to be recognised for being the third largest tobacco market to introduce pictorial health warnings globally and 9th in Asia. The fact is that these warnings are yet to be introduced; they have only been announced so far.

Coming to the 'lead time' given to the tobacco industry, the story refers to the period between the government's decision to introduce pictorial warnings (May 31, 2009) and the date on which these warnings will eventually appear on cigarette packs (May 31, 2010).

This gives the tobacco industry a 'lead time' of one whole year. Pakistan need not emulate countries that allowed a 'lead time' of 3 to 4 years to their tobacco industries because the underlying objective is to save lives.

The Ministry of Health has given in to the tobacco industry's persuasion, and the DG Health has himself expressed disappointment over this sad reality in his comments contained in the story.