

Minister wants funds from cigarettes for promotion of sports

By Imran Ali Teepu

ISLAMABAD, March 28: Federal Sports Minister Aijaz Hussain Jakhrani has proposed to the government to levy an additional 2 per cent tax on every cigarette pack and suggested that the funds so generated be used for the promotion of sports.

Mr Jakhrani, who has served as a federal health minister, put forward his suggestion at a recent meeting of Prime Minister's Task Force on Sports.

Later, during a function in Islamabad he defended his proposal on the grounds that it would generate funds sufficient for promotion of all kinds of sports activities.

Some senior officials were surprised at the minister's proposal, but refused to comment on it because of their positions in various government-run sport organisations and bodies. However, some consumer interest groups and citizens' organisations were unable to hide their outrage.

"It's not only in violation of the rules and guidelines of the World Health Organisation but also simply outrageous," said Dr Arif Azad, head of the Network -- a watchdog on consumer rights.

"This is an ethical issue for the federal government," he said. "Cigarette is a sign of death and generating revenue through the tobacco industry and utilising the revenue for the promotion of sports is unacceptable."

Other experts in the field of

health and sports pointed towards the WHO protocols, saying such a move would be in violation of the World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) of 2005.

One of the clauses of WHO FCTC Article 13, which deals with tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship, calls for prohibition of "all forms of tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship that promote a tobacco product by any means that are false, misleading or deceptive or likely to create an erroneous impression about its characteristics, health effects, hazards or emissions."

Dr Azad insisted that WHO FCTC also "restricted the use of direct or indirect incentives that encouraged the purchase of tobacco product by the public."

Sports analyst Amir Bilal said that PM's Task Force on Sports was assigned a target to revive the national sports but generating revenue through tobacco industry "is not a healthy sign for the promotion of sports".

He said that president of Pakistan Olympic Association Syed Arif Hasan was present at the meeting but he did not express any reservations at the minister's proposal.

Since the first smoke-free Calgary Winter Olympics in 1988, the International Olympic Committee had refused sponsorship and publicity from the tobacco industry, he said.