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PRINTING OF PICTORIAL WARNINGS ON CIGARETTE PACKS

No extension in deadline: Jakhrani

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Islamabad

The tobacco industry left no stone unturned here on Tuesday to obtain an extension in the 'lead-time' for printing of picture-based health warnings on cigarette packs and outers.

Their arguments, however, fell on deaf ears, as Minister for Health Mir Aijaz Hussain Jakhrani ordered the Tobacco Control Cell to 'immediately' finalise the Statutory Regulatory Order (SRO) for introduction of pictorial health warnings, and get it vetted by the Law Division. 'The News' learnt on good authority. "You will have to get picture-based

health warnings printed within six months of the SRO being issued," Jakhrani is said to have clarified to representatives of the tobacco industry while concluding the meeting, which was also attended by Secretary Health Khushnood Akhtar Lashari, Director General Implementation of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) Shaheen Masud, and Asim Imdad, Talal Hakeem and Mehdi Imam from the tobacco industry.

The tobacco industry had slowly, but surely been flexing its muscles to stall the process for incorporation of pictorial health warnings on cigarette packs and outers, and to some-

how have the momentous decision on the issue, reversed or at least delayed.

With the SRO unlikely to be issued before mid-August, the introduction of picture-based warnings has already been delayed till mid-February 2010, as against the January 2010 deadline announced by Jakhrani, earlier on.

Representatives of the tobacco industry cited examples of countries that allowed a 'lead-time' of 11 to 24 months for printing of picture warnings. Jakhrani countered the argument by referring to Chile and Venezuela.

"If a small country like Chile can do it in three months, why can't we," he

asked them. The industry also forwarded the excuse of not having the printing technology to meet the stipulated deadline; drew attention to various flaws in the existing tobacco control legislation to divert attention of the policymakers from the real issue; and put up various other justifications to seek delay in implementation.

"We need at least a year to import the required printing machines," they argued, but nothing worked because both Jakhrani as well as Shaheen Masud effectively countered all excuses forwarded by the tobacco industry, and agreed to expedite the process on a war footing.