

# Growing interference of tobacco industry derailing pro-health policies

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Islamabad

Never in the recent history of tobacco control has the government of Pakistan so dutifully acceded to the tobacco industry's brazen and aggressive interference in its tobacco control policies, as it has today.

Pakistan has long missed its December 2011 deadline for rotation of pictorial health warnings on cigarette packs. It has also missed by two years, the deadline for enforcement of the guidelines of the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control (FCTC) at the national level. And to add salt to injury, the post-devolution merger of the Tobacco Control Cell into the Health Services Academy has reduced the Cell into an ineffectual entity rather than a strong regulatory body for effective implementation of anti-tobacco interventions.

Views to this effect echoed at various forums across the

capital as organisations and activists working for the promotion of public health organised press conferences and issued statements in connection with World No Tobacco Day here on Wednesday.

"The government should resist the tobacco industry by fully enforcing FCTC-compliant tobacco control laws and saving the country's youth from being lured into the trap," Nadeem Iqbal, the executive coordinator of TheNetwork for Consumer Protection demanded at a press conference. He feared that the government's inaction would pave the way for a public health disaster marked by an increase in tobacco-related deaths. The tobacco industry has been engaged in embedding tobacco use in the personal behaviour of individuals, its target being youth, through luring promotional gimmicks.

The national coordinator of the Coalition for Tobacco Control (CTC) Pakistan Khurram

Hashmi urged Prime Minister Gilani to personally intervene and halt the tobacco industry's growing influence on the country's public health policies. He demanded implementation of the Statutory Regulatory Order (SRO) on rotational health warnings with immediate effect, and revival of the status of the Tobacco Control Cell as an independent body.

As more and more countries move to meet their obligations under the FCTC, the tobacco industry's efforts to undermine the treaty are becoming more and more energetic. A major public health challenge of this century is finding a way to harness the powerful influence of the tobacco industry over pro-health policies.

Tobacco kills 5.4 million people a year: that figure will rise to 8.3 million by 2030. According to WHO, tobacco use kills 5.4 million people per year. It is responsible for 1 in 10 adult deaths. Among the five greatest risk fac-

tors for mortality, it is the single most preventable cause of death. Eleven per cent of deaths from ischaemic heart disease, the world's leading killer, are attributable to tobacco use. More than 70% of deaths from lung, trachea and bronchus cancers are also attributable to tobacco use. To half of the world's more than 1 billion smokers will die prematurely of a tobacco-related disease.

More than 100,000 Pakistanis die each year from tobacco-related diseases — an average of 274 deaths a day. As many as 1200 young children (aged 13-15) start smoking in response to the tobacco industry's enticing marketing of its products.

According to a survey conducted by TheNetwork, the tobacco industry has disregarded the ban on mass media advertisement and is now focusing on point-of-sale advertisement. The survey shows that 95% of the shops selling cigarettes in Multan, Rawalpindi and Islamabad

have become a hub for tobacco promotional activities. The survey monitored 405 shops (135 in each city). An overwhelmingly 90% of the shops in these cities were found selling cigarettes to minors in violation of Section 8 of the Prohibition of Smoking and Protection of Non-Smokers' Health Ordinance 2002. Even though the Tobacco Vendors Act 1958 makes it obligatory for every tobacco seller to have a licence, the survey shows that in Islamabad, 83% of the tobacco sellers had no clue of licence while in Multan, the percentage rose to 100% and in Rawalpindi, 52% claimed to have a licence but were unable to produce it.

In a message on the occasion, the UN Secretary General has also urged all governments and civil society to prevent the tobacco industry from derailing the implementation of the Framework Convention. "Let us resist the industry's attacks and pursue our vision of a tobacco-free world," he has invited.