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Fifty-two civil society organizations lament the decision of the Central Government on delaying the implementation of pictorial health warning on tobacco products in India

Pune 30th June, 2010 - In a detractive decision of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), Government of India (GOI), the implementation of new pictorial health warning has been deferred to December 1, 2010 from the earlier commitment of introducing them from June 1, 2010. In March 2010, civil society organizations had joined hands to applaud the government's efforts in notifying effective pictorial warning of cancer-stricken mouth on packs of both smoking and smokeless tobacco. However, the delay in the implementation of new pictorial warning by the GOI is worrying civil society organizations, as in the past, this oscillating stand of GOI had led to further weakening and dilutions of warnings.

Fifty-two organizations under the umbrella of the Advocacy Forum for Tobacco Control (AFTC) met in Mumbai from June 23-25 and deliberated on the delay in enforcement of pictorial health warnings on tobacco products. AFTC is a coalition of 63 pan Indian organizations working in the area of advocacy, awareness, promotion and research related to tobacco control in India. Its main goal is to advance policies for control of tobacco, which is a major public health threat that claims close to 1 million victims annually in India.

“Ironically, this delay in enforcement of pictorial health warning has been notified despite of a Parliamentary Standing Committee's critical remarks on the unsuccessful implementation of the National Tobacco Control Programme as well as India's tobacco control law. Therefore, the immediate implementation of the new effective pictorial warning by the Government is imperative to address the Parliament's concern and protect the nation's health,” says Dr P.C. Gupta, Director, Healis-Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health.

Independent studies assessing the efficacy of pictorial warnings conducted by Healis-Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health have proven that the existing warnings on the packs of tobacco products do not effectively communicate the lethal consequences of tobacco use. The new pictorial warning, notified to be implemented from June 2010 onwards were field tested for effectiveness by Healis - Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health and Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI) in eight states at the behest of the Government.

According to Monika Arora, Senior Director of HRIDAY, “the pictorial warnings rules require the health warnings to be rotated at least once every year to convey the numerous deadly health consequences of tobacco use to present and potential users. The deadline for this has lapsed earlier this month even as 2500 people die from tobacco related diseases everyday in India.”

There has been reported decline in tobacco use in developing countries such as Thailand (ITC project, Thailand), which has been attributed by smokers to effective pictorial warnings on tobacco packs. “Why would not the Indian Government feel the urgent need to implement effective pictorial health warnings to prevent the unnecessary deaths from tobacco use?” questioned the concerned AFTC members.

Also, the coalition collectively highlighted the importance of pictorial warnings in conveying the harmful health effects of tobacco to users, especially in rural areas and those unable to read and write.

During the AFTC conference in Mumbai, tobacco control professionals across India resolved to strongly counteract this Industry pressure and the continuous soft stand of the Government towards pictorial health warnings on tobacco products, and ensure no further delay and dilution of health warnings in India.

About Healis - Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health:

Healis - Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health is an organization dedicated to improving public health in India and other developing countries. Established on August 1, 2004 it is a leader in quality research in India. It conducts research specific to India's unique social and cultural settings to help assess the health situation and to help guide health services and programs. It co-hosted the 14th World Conference on Tobacco or Health in collaboration with agencies of high repute during March 8-12, 2009. It has also played an instrumental role in fostering advocacy development and has actively engaged the media on health related issues. Healis works in collaboration with leading National and International Health and Research organizations.