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NGOs slam delay in pictorial warning on tobacco packs

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Bureau

The central government's decision to postpone the display of pictorial health warnings on tobacco products was criticized by civil societies that asked why the government didn't feel the "urgent need" for such measures that could "prevent unnecessary deaths".

The decision in this regard was taken by the central government May 20.

The 52 civil societies which come under the Advocacy Forum for Tobacco Control (AFTC) said in a statement that the delay in introducing pictorial health warnings on packs of both smoking and smokeless tobacco from June 1, 2010 was postponed to Dec 1.

"Ironically, this delay in enforcement of pictorial health warnings comes inspite 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," said P.C Gupta, director of Healis-Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health.

According to the civil societies, the pictorial warnings can effectively communicate the lethal consequences of tobacco use and thus the deadline for such important messages should not be extended by the government.

"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 2,500 people die from tobacco related diseases every day in India," said Monika Arora, senior director of an NGO HRIDAY (Health Related Information Dissemination Amongst Youth).

There has been a reported decline in tobacco use in developing countries such as 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 unnecessary deaths from tobacco use? It is also easier for people who cannot read or write to get the message of its harmful effects," said a AFTC member.

According to the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), India records about 800,000 tobacco-related deaths every year.

In India, over half of men (57 percent) in the age group of 15-49 years use tobacco in some form and over a tenth (10.9 percent) of women in this age group also use tobacco, according to a National Family Health Survey conducted in 2005-06.