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Outrage Against Delay in Pictorial Warnings on Tobacco Products in India

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Bobby Ramakant

In a detractive decision of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), Government of India (GOI), the implementation of new pictorial health warnings has been deferred to December 1 from the earlier commitment of introducing them from June 1. In March, 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, this delay in implementation of new pictorial warnings by the GOI is worrying civil society organizations, as in the past, this oscillating stand of the Government 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.

"In India the pictorial warnings that got implemented from 31 May 2009 were mild, weak and not field tested," said Professor (Dr) Rama Kant, Executive Director of Tobacco Cessation Clinic (TCC) at the Chhatrapati Shahuji Maharaj Medical University (CSMMU), and a World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General's Awardee (2005). "These pictorial warnings are to be rotated every year as per the Cigarette and Other Tobacco Products Act, 2003. As per an earlier GOI notification, the new pictorial health warnings that were to be implemented from 1 June, were stronger and field-tested, however as a major setback to public health, these warnings have been further delayed till 1 December" informs Prof Rama Kant.

Independent studies assessing the efficacy of pictorial warnings conducted by organizations like Healix-Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health and HRIDAY (Health Related Information Dissemination Amongst Youth) 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 warnings notified to be implemented from June onwards were field tested for effectiveness by the Government before notifying them.

"This is another example of possible interference in public health policy by either tobacco industry, their allies or supporters of tobacco trade. Because the tobacco industry sells a product that kills one million people in India annually, therefore, industry's interests will always be in conflict with public health. It is high time that national tobacco control policies in India are congruent to what India is obligated to do by ratifying the international global tobacco treaty - WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC). India and other parties to WHO FCTC had adopted the strong guidelines for Article 5.3, to protect health policies from tobacco industry interference" said Bobby Ramakant, from the Indian Society Against Smoking, Asha Parivar, who also represents Network for Accountability of Tobacco Transnationals (NATT).

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.