

Address

by

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at the

*Press Conference on the Occasion of World No-
Tobacco Day*

*New Delhi, India
31 May 2004*

**Address by Dr Samlee Plianbangchang,
Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia Region at the Press Conference on
the Occasion of World No-Tobacco Day, 31 May 2004, New Delhi**

Distinguished Media persons, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

- With great pleasure, I welcome you all to World Health House on the occasion of World No Tobacco Day.
- As you are aware, this year's theme is "Tobacco Control and Poverty".
- Tobacco tends to be consumed more by those who are poor.
- We do not have specific evidence on this issue in our Region yet.
- But, a study in the United Kingdom shows that only 10% of women and 12% of men in the highest socioeconomic group are smokers while 35% of women and 40% of men in the lowest group smoke.
- In turn, the consequence of its consumption contributes to poverty through loss of income, loss of productivity due to ill-health and premature death.
- It is the poor who bear most of the economic loss and disease burden of tobacco use.
- Tobacco consumption and poverty form a vicious link.
- Tobacco consumption is also associated with literacy levels.

- A study in 1997 of smoking prevalence among men in Chennai (India), showed that the highest rate, 64%, was among the illiterate population.
- This prevalence decreases by number of years of schooling, it decreases about one fifth (21%) among those with more than 12 years of schooling.
- Yet again, the poverty dimension comes to the fore as illiterate people tend to be poor.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- There are several ways in which tobacco consumption increases poverty at the individual, household and national levels.
- For the poor, money spent on tobacco could well be spent on basic necessities, such as food, shelter, education and health care.
- In one country in the Region, over 10.5 million people currently malnourished could have an adequate diet if money spent on tobacco was spent on food instead.
- Tobacco also perpetuates the poverty of individuals and families since its users are at a much higher risk of falling ill and dying prematurely.
- This further deprives their families of much-needed income and imposes additional health-care costs.
- Those who grow tobacco suffer as well.
- Many tobacco farmers often find themselves in debt to tobacco companies. 3

- Furthermore, tobacco cultivation has serious health consequences.
- Tobacco growers often suffer from green tobacco sickness caused by dermal absorption of nicotine from wet tobacco leaves.
- They also suffer from chronic health conditions due to pesticides used in tobacco farming.
- At the national level, countries suffer significant economic loss due to high health expenditures costs, as well as lost productivity due to related illnesses and premature deaths.
- Countries that are importers of tobacco leaves and tobacco products lose millions of dollars a year in foreign exchange.
- Cigarette smuggling is also a cause for concern.
- Not only does the smuggling lead to an increased consumption, it also affects government tax revenues.
- Deforestation is also caused by tobacco growing as wood is mainly used in the process of tobacco leaf curing.
- Furthermore, environmental degradation is caused by tobacco plant-leaching nutrients from the soil, pollution from pesticides and fertilizers, and a large amount of waste produced by tobacco manufacturing.
- In short, tobacco's contributions to the economy are outweighed by its costs to households, to public health, and to environment.

- Meanwhile, close link has been established between tobacco use and death from TB.
- A recent study in Tamil Nadu (India) has revealed that smokers were three times as likely to have a history of tuberculosis than non-smokers.
- ***It was found in the same study that 50% of deaths among male TB patients between the ages of 25 to 69 years could be attributed to smoking.***
- Governments need to work-out appropriate thematic programmes that can address both tobacco and TB together.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- Let us take a quick look at the impact of tobacco consumption in our Region.
- Of the 4.9 million global deaths every year from tobacco use, 1.1 million people belong to this part of the world.
- The situation is further complicated due to the widespread use of tobacco and the economic implications in controlling or reducing its cultivation.
- One country in this Region is the second largest producer, second largest tobacco consumer, and third largest exporter of tobacco in the world.
- Another country is the sixth largest consumer of tobacco.
- In one country, production of ***bidi (local cigarette)*** has nearly tripled during the last decade.

- To meet this serious challenge, the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia has collaborated with Member states in areas of advocacy, research and surveillance.
- Research has been initiated to gain information for the formulation of effective policies and strategies to tackle problems relating to tobacco use.
- This includes studies on multisectoral mechanisms for developing a comprehensive tobacco control programme.
- The studies address the issues, such as economic implications, health care costs, women and tobacco, community-based measures, and other related areas.
- The findings so far obtained are also being used for designing tobacco control interventions.
- To commemorate this year's World No-Tobacco Day, we are specially undertaking two studies in Bangladesh and Myanmar on tobacco control and poverty.
- The findings of these studies will be used for devising effective policies in this area.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), was adopted by the WHO Member States at the 56th World Health Assembly last year.

- So far, 118 countries have signed the Convention and 16 have ratified it.
- I am very happy to state that of the 11 Member States in this Region, 10 have signed the Convention and 4 have ratified it.
- In keeping with this year's theme, we should advocate that while an increase in tax can reduce tobacco consumption, particularly among the poor, we should also seriously think about alternative livelihood or crop substitution for tobacco growers.
- There is availability of international support for encouraging tobacco growers to switch over to other cash crops, as well as for other anti-tobacco activities, if tobacco control activities are integrated into the overall development agenda.

Distinguished Mediapersons,

- The media can play a very important role in advocating the theme of the World No-Tobacco Day to public, especially the poor, by ensuring that the information really reach them.
- The media can also effectively advocate through policy makers the measures to ensure tobacco control be targeted toward the poor.
- We very much look forward to your support and cooperation in this regard.
- I would like to conclude by reiterating that the FCTC can meaningfully strengthen tobacco control measures in our Region.

- The process can be accelerated if the countries sign and ratify the Convention as early as possible.
- This is important because provisions for international support to countries in carrying out tobacco control are embodied in the FCTC.
- These provisions of the Convention can be fully exploited in favour of better health of the public only when it enters into force after required number of ratifications by Member States is reached.
- Only then can we hope to achieve a tobacco-free world.
- Thank you for your kind attention and for your full support.