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"Smoking Kills" the message delivered by WHO and Ministry of Health to the National Parliament

On August 27th, 2014, Dr. Jorge Mario Luna, WHO Representative, gave a presentation to **National Parliament Committee "F" members** and senior government advisors on the urgent need to take action in the fight against tobacco. Over 70 % of men use tobacco in Timor-Leste, which is one of the highest prevalence rates in the world. Not only adults, but Timorese children, are at risk of a lifelong addiction, tobacco related illnesses and death, if current trends prevail. According to the Global Youth Tobacco Survey conducted in 2013, 48.4% of children aged between 13 and 15 are smokers in Timor-Leste. Intervention is urgently needed.

Highlighting the gravity of the nation's addiction to tobacco, Dr. Luna emphasized that "tobacco is the only legally available product that will kill one in every two people, if used *exactly* as intended by the manufacturers." The health impact is enormous. Globally, each year, 6 million preventable deaths are caused by tobacco, with 600,000 people dying prematurely due to second hand smoke exposure. Smoking causes respiratory diseases, cancer of the lung, mouth, throat, esophagus, bladder, kidney, liver, cervix, stomach, colon, blood and rectum. Smokers are twice as likely to die from a heart attack. Graphic images were displayed during the presentation, so that the causal link between tobacco, disease and death was clearly understood.



Dr Jorge Mario Luna, WHO Representative briefs parliamentarians and Government advisors on tobacco control in Timor-Leste

The commitments made by the Government of Timor-Leste on the ratification of the WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control in 2004 were highlighted. However, legislation remains weak. Only one legal instrument is currently used to regulate tobacco advertising. A brief stroll through the streets of the capital city shows that tobacco companies pay little heed to the advertising laws that are weakly enforced. To overcome these challenges, Dr. Luna put forward the WHO **"MPOWER policy package"** which provides concrete steps for governments to take in order to implement the WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control. The policy measures recommended include increasing tobacco taxation, banning tobacco advertising and promotion, protecting nonsmokers by creating smoke free

laws which ban tobacco use in public places and work environments. “This will not be easy, this will take time. It might take a number of years but it is important that we start taking these first steps here today in order to fight tobacco and reduce illness and death in this country,” advised Dr. Luna.

Following the presentation, Dr. Herculano Seixas, Head of Non Communicable Diseases Department (including Tobacco Control), Ministry of Health, briefed the parliamentarians on the new Tobacco Legislation which is currently in draft and appealed for support when the legislation is put forward for debate later this year. WHO and Ministry of Health cannot work on tobacco control alone, in the face of a very powerful tobacco lobby. Inter-ministerial collaboration, support from parliamentarians, law makers, law enforcers, civil society and media is needed to bring about the change in attitudes towards tobacco, desperately needed in Timor-Leste.

A questions and answers session followed the presentation during which Parliamentary members requested a workshop to brief all parliament members on the health, social and economic impact of tobacco and what steps the Government can take to reduce tobacco consumption in Timor-Leste. Dr. Luna welcomed this opportunity and reaffirmed WHO’s firm commitment to support the Government in all of their efforts to strengthen tobacco control and ultimately improve and protect the health of the Timorese people.



Dr Herculano Seixas, Head of NCD department, Ministry of Health briefs parliament members on the draft tobacco legislation

The parliamentarians present for the meeting included, Sr. Virgilio da Costa Hornai, President of Commission “F”, Sra. Bendita Moniz Magno (Secretary of Committee “F”), Sr. António Ximenes Serpa (Member Committee “F”), Sra. Virginia Ana Belo (Member Committee “D”), Sra. Epifania M. Pinto (Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption - GOPAC), Sr. Lazaro Lelan Sila (GOPAC), Aijan Isamadyrova (UNDP), Sr. Marciano C. Soares (UNDP) and Lucia Vieira Leite, Legal Gender Advisor. The National Parliament Committee F oversees Health, Education, Culture, Veterans and Gender Equality in Timor-Leste. Following the presentation, further advocacy is now being planned by WHO, Ministry of Health and the National Parliament later this year.



National Parliament, WHO, Ministry of Health and UNDP representatives including Sr. Virgilio da Costa Hornai MP, President of Commission F, Sra. Bendita Moniz Magno MP, Sr. António Ximenes Serpa MP, Sr. Eladio Faculto MP, Sra. Virginia Ana Belo MP, Dr J.M. Luna, WHO Representative, Dr Herculano Seixas, Head of NCD Dept, Sr Mario Sere Kai, Tobacco Control, Sra. Epifania M. Pinto, Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC), Sr. Lazaro Lelan Sila, GOPAC, Aijan Isamadyrova, UNDP, Marciano C. Soares, UNDP and Lucia Vieira Leite, Legal Gender Advisor