Every year, WHO and its partners observe World No Tobacco Day on 31 May highlighting the health risks associated with tobacco use and the need for strengthening effective policies to reduce tobacco consumption. The theme for this year’s World No Tobacco Day is “ban tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship”.

It is encouraging to note that Member States in the South-East Asia Region have intensified tobacco control efforts. I am very pleased that the Health Law regulation (109/2012) has been published in Indonesia in December 2012. This regulation covers such provisions as smoke-free public places, pictorial health warnings, and restrictions on tobacco advertising and promotion. In Bangladesh, the amendment of tobacco legislation has been approved by the cabinet in November 2012. In India, taxation on cigarettes has been significantly increased. Many Indian states have banned the sale of gutkha, which is a very dangerous form of chewing tobacco. Thailand has increased taxation on manufactured cigarettes and on shredded (roll-your-own) tobacco, while Indonesia has simplified its tax structure and increased the tax rates on cigarettes. Myanmar has also significantly increased its tax rates on all forms of tobacco products. Nepal adopted comprehensive tobacco control legislation in 2011 and Sri Lanka adopted regulations on pictorial health warnings in August 2012. Very recently, the Ministry of Public Health, Thailand announced that 85% of space on cigarette packages will be covered by graphic health warnings which should be a good example for other countries. The WHO Regional Office and WHO country offices in the Region have worked closely with the respective ministries of health and with partners in tobacco control to achieve these results. Timor-Leste has increased its public awareness campaigns and the Regional Office is providing technical support on drafting their tobacco control legislation. Many countries have established smoke-free public places and banned advertising of tobacco products. This reflects strong commitment of the governments on tobacco control and to the joint efforts of government and civil society.
To curb the tobacco epidemic, adopting legislation is not enough. Enforcement is very important which is still weak in many countries of our Region. Global Adult Tobacco Survey reports from Member States of the Region show that over two thirds of adults are exposed to tobacco advertisements and promotion in one form or another.

Public education on the hazards of tobacco use as well as on national policies on tobacco control is very important. The public should also be made aware of the techniques adopted by the tobacco industry to interfere with tobacco control measures in countries of our Region.

Understanding the tobacco industry’s practices is crucial to successfully formulate tobacco control policy. In this context, it is important also to understand that tobacco products are the only legally available products that can kill up to one half of their regular users if consumed as recommended by the manufacturer. In recognition of this reality, the World Health Organization monitors and draws global attention to the activities and practices of the tobacco industry. It does so in conformity with World Health Assembly Resolution WHA54.18 and the provisions of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

A comprehensive ban of all tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship is required under the WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control. It is well documented that comprehensive advertising bans lead to a reduction in the numbers of people starting and continuing smoking. Statistics show that banning tobacco advertising and sponsorship is one of the most cost-effective ways to reduce tobacco demand and thus is a tobacco control “best buy”. An effective ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship should be comprehensive and applicable to all tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship. Effective monitoring, enforcement and sanctions supported and facilitated by strong public education and community awareness programmes are essential for implementation of a comprehensive ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship.

As stated in the WHO report on the global tobacco epidemic, 2011, despite the effectiveness of comprehensive bans, only 19 countries representing 6% of the world’s population had instituted comprehensive national bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship in 2010. Statistics showed conclusively that comprehensive ban on all tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship could decrease tobacco consumption by an average of about 7%, with some countries experiencing a decline in consumption of up to 16%.

In the South-East Asia Region 10 of the 11 Member States have adopted tobacco control legislation and the Regional Office is providing technical support to Timor-Leste to develop a comprehensive tobacco law. Although most countries have tobacco control laws, only four have enforced a comprehensive ban on direct advertising of
all tobacco products on national and international TV channels and radio, local and international newspapers and magazines, billboards and outdoor advertising, point-of-sale advertising and on internet sales. Only five countries have banned sponsored events by tobacco companies and two countries have prohibited the tobacco industry from publicizing their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities.

Meanwhile, global youth tobacco surveys (GYTS) have showed that nearly three in four students in the Region are exposed to pro-cigarette ads on billboards and to pro-tobacco messages at sports and other events. About one in ten students had an object with a cigarette brand logo and one in ten students had been offered free cigarettes by a tobacco company. Seven in ten students saw cigarette brand names when watching sports events on TV. These data are alarming as they show how the tobacco industry has been using all kinds of techniques to allure the youth to become addicted to tobacco. Once the youth have experimented with tobacco, they are prone to become tobacco users as adults. Our efforts should focus on preventing the youth from being exposed to all forms of tobacco advertisement, promotion and sponsorship. Enforcement of a ban on sale of tobacco to minors should also be strengthened.

We also need to be aware of the CSR activities of the tobacco industry such as funding of smoking prevention programmes for youth, rescue efforts during natural disasters, education and research grants, sponsoring of sports and social events etc. These activities of the tobacco industry are aimed to gain respect of the public while marketing their tobacco brands. Research has shown that their smoking prevention programmes for youth did not prevent the youth from smoking. The research funded by the industry also aims to defend the tobacco industry by diluting the strong evidence of the hazards of tobacco on health.

It is important to note that delegates from Member States of the Region participated in the third session of the Conference of the Parties in November 2008 where guidelines for implementation of Article 13 of the WHO FCTC on “Tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship” was adopted. On World No-Tobacco Day 2013, I urge Member States to fully implement these guidelines to comprehensively ban tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship so that fewer people start and continue to use tobacco; and to drive local, national and international efforts to counteract the efforts of the tobacco industry to undermine tobacco control, specifically their efforts to stall or stop comprehensive bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship.

Dr Samlee Plianbangchang
Regional Director