Today is the 31st of May. It is “World No-Tobacco Day”.

The theme of this year’s World No-Tobacco Day is “Tobacco-free Youth”. The slogan is “Ban All Tobacco Advertising, Promotion and Sponsorship”.

The focus of this year’s World No-Tobacco Day is to protect young people from experimenting with tobacco and becoming regular users. This can be done through a comprehensive ban on all forms of tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship. It also stresses the need to counter the tactics of the tobacco industry, which attempts to normalize tobacco use. This is by portraying it as an ordinary consumer product and by spreading misleading information about the health hazards of tobacco use.

Nearly 500 million young people between the ages of 10 and 24 years live in the South-East Asia Region. They are aggressively targeted by the tobacco industry to make them become tobacco users. According to various surveys, most people begin the use of tobacco before the age of 18; but almost a quarter of these young people start using tobacco even before the age of 10. These people are usually too young to understand the risk of addiction to nicotine and the tragic health consequences. Also, the younger they are when they first try tobacco, the more likely they are to become regular users, and the less likely to quit.

According to surveys in a few selected countries of the Region, a majority of youths between 13 and 15 years old are using some form of tobacco. The South-East Asia Region has also a huge amount of non-cigarette products, such as bidis, kretek and cheroots; and the Region has a wide range of smokeless tobacco products. The rate of use of these products ranges from 3.8% in one country to 24.1% in another.

The tobacco industry spends tens of billions of dollars worldwide every year to market their products. Their strategies include direct and indirect advertisement through various media, such as television, radio, and Internet. In response to this massive campaign, only a comprehensive ban on all forms of advertisement, promotion and sponsorship can be effective.

The WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) provides a legislative framework for a complete ban on advertisement of all forms of tobacco products. With one exception, all Member States of the SEA Region are parties to the convention, and they all are committed to implementing the provisions of the WHO FCTC.

According to the 2008 WHO Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic, there was a decline in tobacco consumption of up to 16% after advertising bans. To be more effective in the control of
tobacco use, the same Global Report recommended the concomitant implementation of the following public health interventions:

- Monitoring tobacco use and prevention policies;
- protecting people from tobacco smoke;
- offering help to quit tobacco use;
- issuing warning about the dangers of tobacco;
- enforcing bans on all forms of tobacco advertisement; and
- raising taxes on tobacco products.

National campaigns to create smoke-free environments for protecting young people are gaining ground. Given the importance of protecting future generations, there is an urgent need to recognize the widespread problem of tobacco use, especially among young people. To a large extent, this problem is due to weak legislation and weak enforcement in many countries. All sectors of the government need to work vigorously together for tobacco control. Close coordination and collaboration among governmental and nongovernmental organizations is a key to success in this formidable task.

On this occasion, I urge all governments to double their efforts towards a comprehensive ban on all forms of advertisement of tobacco products. It should be kept in mind that a partial ban or voluntary policy in this regard will have little or no impact on reducing demand for tobacco. This is because advertising by the tobacco industry can switch over to alternative media. In this connection, the importance of public education to raise awareness cannot be overemphasized.

I specially urge young people to refrain from smoking, and to stop using other tobacco products. I urge them to get involved in campaigns to educate other youths on the harmful effects of tobacco use. For its part, WHO will continue working closely with the governments in developing and implementing national tobacco control programmes.

Let us move forward untiringly together in order to create a healthier environment for young people — the environment that is free from all forms of tobacco products.

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