Every year on 31 May, we observe World No Tobacco Day to raise global awareness about the need for tobacco control to protect our present and future generations from harmful effects of tobacco on health, and the social, environmental and economic consequences of tobacco use in a larger perspective.

Tobacco control is indeed a challenge for the WHO South-East Asia Region, which is home to 246 million smokers and 290 million smokeless tobacco users. Despite regulations being in place, too many people in the Region are still exposed to tobacco advertisements, promotion and sponsorship. According to the Global Youth Tobacco Surveys, about 60% of adolescents in the Region are exposed to pro-tobacco advertisements on a regular basis. Tobacco packaging has been an influential marketing tactic for the industry to enhance the appeal and attractiveness of tobacco products to both current users and users-to-be, including young people and women.

The theme for World No Tobacco Day 2016 is “Get ready for plain packaging”. Plain packaging is an important demand reduction measure that reduces the effectiveness of tobacco products, restricts use of tobacco packaging as a form of tobacco advertising and promotion, limits misleading packaging and labelling, and increases the effectiveness of health warnings.

Australia is a pioneer with the plain packaging initiative, implemented in that country since December 2012. According to their law, all tobacco products must be sold in standardized drab, dark brown packaging, with no logos, imagery, colours and promotional messages, and with large graphic health warnings. Research shows that plain packages are less appealing to a substantial proportion of smokers. Following Australia’s example, many countries have now expressed their aspiration for plain packaging of tobacco products. Until now, four countries have legislative measures in place for plain packaging, and many more are expected to follow.

Plain packaging is the appropriate response to warn the public about the harms caused by tobacco as well as to regulate tobacco marketing, thereby killing two birds with one stone.

On World No Tobacco Day, WHO urges all Member States to take a significant step forward by adopting plain packaging with health warnings on all tobacco products, both smoking and smokeless. Plain packaging is well in line with the guidelines for implementation of Article 11 (Packaging and labelling of tobacco products) and Article 13 (Tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship) of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

We should be aware of the fact that while tobacco consumption is falling in the developed world, it is rising in low- and middle-income countries. The Seventh Session of the Conference of Parties to the Framework Convention (COP7) will be held in our Region in 2016. WHO stands ready to support its Member States in implementing evidence-based, cost-effective tobacco...
control strategies, including the WHO Framework Convention and WHO MPOWER Package, to help tobacco users to quit as well as to dissuade new users, especially children and women, from taking up tobacco use. This will help to save innumerable lives.

Moreover, reducing tobacco use is critical to achieving each of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Sustainable Development Goal 3 aims to promote health and well-being for all at all ages with the WHO FCTC being the specific target of this goal. This provides an opportunity as well as a platform to progress towards achieving the global and regional targets of reducing tobacco use by 30% by 2025 as provided in the WHO Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of NCDs 2013–2020.

I sincerely hope that the Member States of the WHO South-East Asia Region will strive towards prioritizing the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention and MPOWER Package to achieve these goals and targets in a timely manner.

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