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SHORT COMMUNICATION

World No Tobacco Day 2006

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There seem to be as many forms of tobacco as there are computer viruses or species of fly, and they seem to multiply and evolve faster than genetically modified plants. There is rolled tobacco – cigarettes, cigars, bidis and kreteks. There is tobacco for pipes. There is tobacco for *waterpipes*, including hookahs, bhangs, narghiles and shishas. There is flavoured tobacco – sweetened, spiced and herbed. There is chewing tobacco and other kinds of smokeless tobacco, including snuff, snus and gutkha. There is organic tobacco, filtered, so-called “light and mild” or “natural” and mentholated. There is even tobacco that is “heated” rather than “burned,” such as R.J. Reynolds’ Eclipse.

The ever-expanding multiplicity of forms underscores the tobacco industry’s determination to grow as lawsuits and education campaigns threaten its high profits.

Although the various forms are intended to attract different kinds of consumers, they are similar in one important respect: all are dangerous and addictive to humans and all can cause disease and death, the industry’s deceptive insinuations of relative safety notwithstanding.

The essentially harmful nature of all tobacco products, regardless of how they are advertised, packaged and processed, is the central message of a new report by the World Health Organization,

Tobacco: deadly in any form or disguise. The report’s title also was the theme of the 17th World No Tobacco Day on 31 May 2006.

As the report emphasizes, “Tobacco addiction is a global epidemic that is ravaging countries and regions that can least afford its toll of disability, disease, lost productivity and death... Now, as nations have begun to fight back and, in some countries, to turn back the epidemic, tobacco companies continue to develop new products to maintain their profits, often disguising these new products in a cloak of attractiveness and reduced harmfulness.”

The estimates in the report are staggering:

- Number of smokers: 1.3 billion.
- Proportion of smokers who will eventually die from a tobacco-related disease: half.
- Number of people who died last year from consumption of tobacco: 5 million (as opposed to the 4 million estimated by the World Health Organization to have died in 2004).
- Number of people who will die in 2020 at present consumption patterns: nearly 10 million.

Unfortunately, not all of the 1.3 billion smokers are adults. Nevertheless, if one were to assume that all are adults, and if adults comprise approximately two-thirds of the world’s population of 6.5 billion, then approximately 1 adult in every 3 smokes – a shockingly high proportion.

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The report stresses that the burden of tobacco-related disease and death is rapidly shifting to low- and middle-income countries, where tobacco companies find "a huge potential market," where "they often face weaker tobacco control measures and find a great number of possible new customers" and where the "increasing burden of tobacco poses a particular challenge to economic and public health advances in developing countries.

It stresses that the tobacco epidemic is expanding among women and that "tobacco consumption among girls is increasing dramatically around the globe, and that prevalence is, in many cases, comparable to or even greater than that among boys."

Besides the addictive substance nicotine, the report describes a veritable witch's brew of harmful chemicals – more than 4000 of them – which consumers of tobacco also invite into their bodies, including "residual pesticides, herbicides, fertilizer, heavy metals, arsenic, cyanide and other toxins."

How to respond to the threat? By fully implementing the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the report says. The convention, which has been ratified by 128 of its 168 signatories and took effect last year, is designed, according to its own Article 3, "to protect present and future generations from the devastating health, social, environmental and economic consequences of tobacco consumption and exposure to tobacco smoke."

The preamble to the Framework Convention states that "scientific evidence has unequivocally established that tobacco consumption and expo-

sure to tobacco smoke cause death, disease and disability, and that there is a time lag between the exposure to smoking and the other uses of tobacco products and the onset of tobacco-related diseases."

"It is vital that these products be regulated because they are all harmful and addictive," the report emphasizes.

The regulation should be "comprehensive" to include "all tobacco product ingredients and emissions, harm, manufacture, communications and marketing" as endorsed by the Framework Convention, the report says, adding that the need "is of increasing urgency as the harm to individuals, families, populations and nations is projected to continue increasing at a devastating rate if it continues on its current course."

The World Heart Federation marked World No Tobacco Day 2006 by urging its members to fully implement the Framework Convention, pointing out that tobacco consumption accounts for 20% of cardiovascular deaths, of which there were 17.5 million in 2005.

"As the report states, 'All tobacco products are harmful and addictive and all can cause disease and death,'" said World Heart Federation Chief Executive Officer Janet Voûte. "People shouldn't allow themselves to be deceived by the tobacco industry's false insinuations of safety. The industry's attempts to keep and increase market share make it more imperative than ever that all countries implement strong tobacco control measures as recommended in the Framework Convention."

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