

31 August 2012, Cairo, Egypt - The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean commends Australia's landmark decision to dismiss the tobacco industry's legal claim against the country's new restrictive tobacco marketing laws. The High Court ruled against Big tobacco in favour of the Australian government implementing a plain packaging policy on all cigarette packs. "This is not only a victory to the Australian government", says Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean "but a real victory for the tobacco control movement as a whole".

This verdict builds up the momentum for all other countries around the world to pursue and adopt stronger, stricter measures to control tobacco use, fearless of the tobacco industry and other vested interests. Dr Alwan adds, "this verdict gives hope and motivation to all other countries around the world to scale up in their fight against tobacco use".

Australia will be the first country to sell cigarettes in drab, olive-green packaging, in line with the guidelines of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. This landmark decision, announced 15 August 2012, is a public health victory that counters the ruthless marketing tactics employed by the tobacco industry and sets an example for the rest of the world to follow. "In his own words", says Dr Alwan, "Australia's Minister of Trade, a true visionary, explained: "plain packaging is anti-cancer not anti-trade!"

Evidence has shown that plain packaging reduces the attractiveness of tobacco products to specific segments of the population targeted by tobacco companies, in particular young people. "With this verdict", explains Dr Alwan "there is no going back in tobacco control – only forward".

"The tobacco epidemic is accelerating in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and there is a pressing need for our countries to take maximum measures to control tobacco. While we continue to debate textual warnings, other countries are taking concrete steps to implement plain packaging! While we continue to face challenges declaring indoor spaces smoke-free, other countries are declaring public parks smoke-free! Our Region deserves the best and it will indeed get it."

Pursuant to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and the UN Declaration on Noncommunicable Diseases, tobacco control is no longer a choice – it is a commitment. Tobacco control is an international obligation that governments must adhere to; public health

measures should be given the priority over any other interests.

While the world celebrates the Australian government's victory, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean urges its Member States to scale up their efforts towards full implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and the proven measures, which include:

implementing pictorial health warnings (50% minimum) on tobacco products packs;

adopting a total ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship;

enforcing a complete ban on tobacco use in public places;

increasing tobacco prices to control access by young people;and continuing to monitor the epidemic and introduce tobacco dependence treatments.

"Implementing the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and the scientific-based effective measures is the only way to curb the tobacco epidemic", Says Dr Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean.

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