

Cairo, 20 August 2013 - The World Health Organization (WHO) is greatly concerned at the level at which tobacco use, in all its forms, has been aggressively promoted during the airing of drama series screened across the Eastern Mediterranean Region during the holy month of Ramadan. Viewers were regularly exposed to scenes in which celebrities, even those known to be non-smokers, were shown gratuitously smoking or holding unlit cigarettes or electronic cigarettes, giving the message that they were deliberately promoting tobacco. These practices raise questions about the relationship between the tobacco and entertainment industries, and reflect the tactics employed by the tobacco industry to promote and market its products through films, drama and entertainment. This is especially dangerous during Ramadan when there is high viewership of all age groups. The TV channels have a direct responsibility in allowing drama series that heavily promote tobacco to be aired during Ramadan.

On the World No Tobacco Day 2013, WHO urged governments and partners to comprehensively ban all forms of tobacco advertisement, promotion and sponsorship through implementation of Article 13 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) to reduce the prevalence of tobacco use and exposure to secondhand smoke. The legal obligations of State Parties to the WHO FCTC to implement tobacco control measures and ban tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship were further reinforced by the commitments of Member States, that endorsed the United Nations Political Declaration of the High Level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases, which places tobacco control at the top of the international health agenda.

“The attempts of the tobacco industry to target youth by glamourizing tobacco use to encourage its use and initiation is particularly alarming”, Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, said. “WHO is now conducting a review of drama series in regard to promotion of tobacco and other behaviours that undermine public health, which were heavily broadcast on TV this Ramadan, and will present the findings to the Sixtieth Session of the Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean, to be held in Oman in October 2013, which is the annual meeting of the Ministers of Health in the Region”.

The link between increased rates of tobacco use, especially among younger people, and greater promotion of tobacco use through films, drama and entertainment has been firmly established. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, there are already high rates of tobacco use among youth and adults of both sexes. Rates for tobacco use among men range from 52% in Tunisia to 38% in Pakistan, and for women from 11% in Yemen to 6% in Jordan. Among males in the 13–15 age group rates range from 40% in Lebanon and Qatar to 20% in most countries. Among females of the same age group, rates range from 30% in Lebanon to between 10% and 20% in most countries.

While some countries are still in the process of developing comprehensive legislation to implement a full ban, WHO calls upon the drama-making industry and the TV channels to act responsibly in this matter. This is best done through total elimination of tobacco use scenes from TV series.

In implementing Article 13 of the WHO FCTC the Parties have recognized that a comprehensive ban on advertising, promotion and sponsorship would reduce the consumption of tobacco products. This is critical to improving the health of the population of the Eastern Mediterranean Region. WHO therefore calls upon all parties - governments, policy-makers, ministries of information, national monitoring agencies, civil society organizations and the entertainment industry- to rise up to their responsibilities to implement national obligations under the WHO FCTC through the development of coherent legislation and policies to achieve a comprehensive ban on all tobacco advertisement, promotion and sponsorship in the Region.

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