

## Global Anti-Smoking Pact Goes Into Effect

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GENEVA (Reuters) - A global treaty aimed at dissuading children from smoking and helping adults kick the habit came into force on Sunday with the United Nations saying it could save millions of lives.

The World Health Organization (WHO) applauded the strong warnings on cigarette packages and the eventual ban on tobacco advertising and sponsorship laid down in the world's first international public health treaty.

"It's entry into force is a demonstration of governments' commitment to reduce death and illness from tobacco use," said WHO Director-General Lee Jong-wook in a statement to mark the event.

Tobacco, the second leading cause of preventable deaths globally after hypertension, kills 4.9 million people a year, the U.N. agency says.

And the annual death toll from tobacco-related diseases -- lung cancer, heart attacks and cardiovascular diseases -- could soar to 10 million by 2020, with 70 percent of the deaths in developing countries, it adds.

The treaty, known as the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, gives members three years to slap strong health warnings on tobacco packages and five years to ban advertising, promotion and sponsorship.

It also recommends tax increases on tobacco products, a crackdown on smuggling, and reducing exposure to second-hand smoke.

Approved by the WHO's 192 member states in May 2003, the pact became law on Sunday, 90 days after the 40th state had ratified it.

It will only carry legal weight in those countries which have ratified it, now numbering 57. In total, 167 countries have signed the pact -- but have not necessarily sent it to parliament for ratification.

LOBBYING

WHO officials and activists say the powerful tobacco industry is lobbying intensively to restrict the number of countries applying the treaty, including the United States which has signed up but not yet sent it to the Senate.

"The tobacco industry wants to be free to sell and market their deadly products in such a way that they have more and more profits. This is the only language the tobacco industry knows," Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva, director of the WHO's Tobacco Free Initiative, told journalists.

"In Brazil, my country, the tobacco industry is furiously lobbying the Congress and the Senate in order not to get the treaty ratified. They are using the tobacco farmers to make the case, saying that they will lose their jobs."

Activists accuse the Bush administration, which signed the pact last May, of having worked hard to dilute it.

"U.S. ratification of the treaty would send a strong message to the rest of the world that we will not support these efforts and instead put protection of public health ahead of tobacco industry interests," the U.S.-based Tobacco Free Kids lobby group said.

Douglas Bettcher, treaty coordinator, was upbeat. "We are happy to report that industry is not winning this game."

Some of the largest tobacco growers -- India, Japan, Pakistan, Thailand and Turkey -- as well as cigarette producing countries such as Britain, Germany, the Netherlands and Turkey are among those which ratified have the treaty, he said.