

UN leader accuses big business of health cover-up

September 19 2011, by Pierre-Antoine Donnet

UN leader Ban Ki-moon Monday accused big business of putting public health at risk "to protect their own profits" as he launched a summit on everyday diseases killing tens of millions each year.

About 36 million people die each year from cancer, heart disease, diabetes and other non-communicable diseases and the UN is predicting an explosion in the death toll, particularly in poor countries in Africa.

Ban told the summit that governments had to launch prevention campaigns, but he singled out corporations who have been strongly attacked by [health](#) groups over their marketing of processed and sugar heavy foods.

"I depend on our friends in industry to do what is right," the UN secretary general said.

Ban called himself "a champion of the private sector" but said "some hard truths" must be recognized.

"There is a well-documented and shameful history of certain players in industry who ignored the science -- sometimes even their own research -- and put public health at risk to protect their own profits."

Ban said most industry giants have "acted responsibly" but added: "That is all the more reason we must hold everyone accountable -- so that the disgraceful actions of a few do not sully the reputation of the many

which are doing such important work to foster our progress."

Ban called upon corporations that profit from selling processed foods to children "to act with the utmost integrity."

"I refer not only to [food manufacturers](#), but also the media, marketing and advertising companies that play central roles in these enterprises," he told the summit.

"Those who profit from [alcohol sales](#) have to do their part to promote moderation in [alcohol consumption](#). And we can all work to end tobacco use."

The non-communicable diseases summit is only the second to be held on a health issue at the UN General Assembly after the world AIDS summit a decade ago.

There is growing alarm among [health experts](#) at the global growth in diseases such as obesity and diabetes. A World Economic Forum report launched Monday said the world will spend \$47 trillion over the next two decades treating non-communicable diseases.

"The worldwide increase of the NCDs is a slow-motion disaster," World Health Organization director general Margaret Chan said. "Obesity is the signal that something is terribly wrong in the policy environment."

"Processed foods which are high in salt, transfat and sugar have become the new staple food in nearly every corner of the globe," she said.

A procession of leaders from the around the world backed the calls for action.

Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff said productivity losses and the cost to

families and the health system from these diseases add up to about one percent of gross domestic product.

She said the Brazilian government had given free access to drugs for hypertension and diabetes to 5.4 million people through a scheme with 20,000 drug stores. It has also set up 4,000 new physical activity centers.

Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe called on rich countries to do more to help poorer nations to "ensure access to medicines, appropriate technology transfer and further training for our health personnel" to counter the diseases.

The World Economic Forum study estimated that the cumulative output loss over the next 20 years represents approximately 4.0 percent of annual global GDP.

"While mental ill-health is typically left off the list of top NCDs, it alone accounts for over \$16 trillion, or one-third, of the overall \$47 trillion anticipated spent on NCDs," said the WEF.

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