

Lebanon smoking ban takes effect, sparking anger

September 3 2012, by Rana Moussaoui

A smoking ban in all closed public spaces, including coffee shops, restaurants and bars, went into force in Lebanon on Monday under new legislation that promises hefty fines for lawbreakers.

In a country considered a "smokers' paradise," the law took effect a year ago in airports, hospitals and schools, but took hold on a wider basis on Monday, also banning tobacco advertisements criticised for luring youths into the habit.

Smokers caught lighting up in a closed public space face a \$90 penalty, while restaurant or cafe owners who turn a blind eye to offenders could be fined anything from \$900 to \$2,700.

The number of smokers in Lebanon is among the highest in the region and cancer-related illnesses directly linked to tobacco are rising at a rapid rate, health professionals say.

Still, there is speculation as to how far the new ban can actually hold in a country where cigarette, cigar and nargileh (water-pipe) smoking is so popular and widespread.

It was met with discontent among clients of the coffee shops of the central Hamra district of Beirut.

"We have mountains of waste and minibuses spewing carbon dioxide. The government would have done better to address these issues before

prohibiting smoking," said Saad Fleifel, peering over a nargileh on a cafe terrace.

Like the majority of people interviewed by AFP, he accused the authorities of depriving him of the right to "unwind" in Lebanon, a country plagued by years of war, instability and economic woes.

"Banning cigarettes is a European concept, but shishas are a way of life in eastern Lebanon and they want to deprive us of that!" said Saad, referring to nargileh.

"Hookah bars are the only things that work in Lebanon," added his companion Firas Ghali, using another term for the water-pipes.

The 30-year-old retailer questioned the application of the law, predicting that "within a week or two, many cafes will close their doors."

Some 46 percent of Lebanese men and 31 percent of women are regular cigarette smokers, according to World Health Organisation figures that date back to November 2010.

Cigarettes in Lebanon cost little more than a dollar a pack, a price even many teenagers can afford.

But rather than focus on the potential health benefits, many have focused on the potential economic cost of the new law.

Restaurant and cafe owners have cried foul, warning that nargileh cafe owners especially will suffer.

Many owners of cafes and restaurants immediately organised a sit-in protest in Beirut to protest against the law, demanding that they be allowed to create smoking areas.

One coffee shop owner in Hamra expressed concerns about the likely impact on his business.

"Nearly 80 percent of our customers come here for the hookah. How will we do in winter when there won't be any terraces?" he asked.

The new law was also met with derision in second city Tripoli, scene of recent fighting between pro- and anti-Syrian factions.

"It's a weird country, Lebanon. It is forbidden to smoke, but kidnapping people is allowed," said one Tripoli resident, referring to recent abductions claimed by known perpetrators who were not arrested.

Several other countries in the Middle East have adopted anti-tobacco laws, but their enforcement has proven often difficult as smoking, especially of the nargileh, is hugely popular.

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