

Smoking Philippine leader OKs cigarette warnings

July 20 2014, by Jim Gomez



In this July 14, 2014 file photo, Philippine President Benigno Aquino III walks to interact with his guests following his address to the nation in a live broadcast from the Presidential Palace in Manila, Philippines. The Philippine president, a known smoker, has signed a law that requires tobacco companies to put scary health warnings on cigarette packs in a country where tens of thousands of people die every year from tobacco-linked diseases. President Aquino's spokesman, Herminio Coloma Jr., said Sunday, July 20, 2014 that the Philippine leader signed the law "to effectively instill health consciousness through graphic health warnings on tobacco products." (AP Photo/Bullit Marquez, File)

(AP)—Philippine President Benigno Aquino III, a known smoker, has signed a law requiring tobacco companies to put graphic health warnings on cigarette packs in a country where tens of thousands of people die every year from tobacco-linked diseases, an official said Sunday.

Aquino signed the law Friday "to effectively instill health consciousness through graphic health warnings on tobacco products," presidential spokesman Herminio Coloma Jr. said. With the law, the Philippines joins more than 40 other nations and territories that have adopted similar regulations and brought the battle against smoking to the cover of cigarette packs.

Research has suggested that the scary warnings have prompted some to quit smoking, but the World Health Organization estimates that nearly 6 million people continue to die globally each year from smoking-related causes. The tobacco industry has fought government efforts to introduce or increase the size of graphic warnings in some countries.

The Philippine law was not immediately made public, but legislation approved by lawmakers last month required 50 percent of the bottom of cigarette packs, front and back, to be covered by graphic pictures and illustrations of smoking hazards such as damaged lungs and throats.

Anti-tobacco advocates welcomed the law rather cautiously.

Emer Rojas, a laryngeal cancer survivor who heads an anti-tobacco group in the Philippines, said the law would discourage would-be smokers and reduce tobacco consumption, but added it was a compromise that also accommodated the concerns of tobacco companies.

"It's like seeing poison on a pack," Rojas said. "This will save many from smoking, especially the young."

He called for vigilance, saying there were provisions in the law that may allow tobacco companies to interfere in the law's enforcement.

The Philippines is a tobacco producer and smoking haven, with one of Asia's highest smoking rates. It had some of the lowest prices for tobacco products before a "sin tax" law took effect last year.

A recent Department of Health-commissioned survey indicated that the law helped reduce smoking among the poor and young people.

Philippine health officials said in 2012 that 17.3 million of the country's 96 million people smoke—one of Southeast Asia's highest rates—and that 87,000 die each year from tobacco-related diseases.

Aquino has been criticized by anti-tobacco advocates for refusing calls to give up the habit. After winning the presidency in 2010, he said he discussed his smoking habit in one of his first telephone conversations with President Barack Obama, who told him then that he had kicked the habit.

"Mr. President, I understand we have the same issue with smoking," Aquino said he told Obama at the time. "He said, 'Well, I quit that already. I have quit. It's your sole problem. At the time that you decide to quit, I'll send the advice.'"

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