

Turkmenistan takes cigarettes off shelves in anti-smoking campaign

January 14 2016

Turkmenistan's authorities have forced shops to stop selling cigarettes, traders in Ashgabat said Thursday, after its president urged citizens to kick the habit.

State anti-narcotics officials "came to our shop recently and forced us to remove [cigarettes](#) from the shelves, threatening us with huge fines," said Bairam Saryev, the 34-year-old owner of a small store in the capital.

Saryev's shop was one of those targeted in a wave of raids in the isolated Central Asian country after President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov slammed the country's anti-smoking strategy at a televised government meeting on January 5.

Berdymukhamedov, a former dentist, threatened to dismiss the chief of the anti-narcotics agency—called the State Service for Security of Healthy Society—calling for "mass measures to eradicate smoking."

Since then, owners of kiosks and shops have only sold cigarettes under the counter and "only to regular customers and friends," said one Ashgabat kiosk trader called Vepa.

The ban on cigarette sales has not been officially announced or published by the government.

But 24-year-old Vepa said that the fine for violating the ban amounted to "10 (average) monthly salaries."

The sweeping move has resulted in already high prices for a pack of cigarettes doubling on the street from around 25 manat to 50 manat (over \$14), Vepa said.

"Because of the high price, sales of single cigarettes are growing, for about 2 manat apiece," he said.

Berdymukhamedov, who took the helm of the Caspian nation in 2006, has presided over a crackdown on smokers.

Turkmenistan is now the country with the lowest percentage of smokers in the world, according to the World Health Organisation.

Only eight percent of the population in Turkmenistan smokes, WHO chief Margaret Chan said last year, calling it "the lowest national indicator in the world."

The country's previous president Saparmurat Niyazov was a chain smoker who quit in 2000 after heart surgery and subsequently signed an anti-smoking decree.

Gradually stricter measures have been phased in since then, including a hike in excise taxes for tobacco in 2011 and a ban on smoking in public areas in 2013.

These measures had already made cigarettes in Turkmenistan more expensive than in any other country in the ex-Soviet region.

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