

Dutch activists seek to stub out smokers' corner in cafes

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Dutch anti-cigarette campaigners Thursday launched a lawsuit against the government calling for an end to spaces reserved for smokers in cafes and bars.

Despite a general ban on smoking in restaurants, pubs and bars introduced in 2008, more than 25 percent of the country's cafes still have an enclosed area inside where patrons can legally light up, campaigners say.

"More cafes are creating designated smoking areas. That doesn't fix the problem, it is working the other way around," Floris Van Galen, the lawyer for Clean Air Nederland told AFP.

"We have a smoking ban, but if there are more designated smoking areas in cafes, people will see others smoking, younger people will be tempted to enter the smoking area to also start smoking."

The organisation says that the number of smoking areas in cafes shot up from 19 percent in 2014 to 25 percent in 2015.

Under Dutch law, cafes which are smaller than 70 square metres (753 square feet) can set aside a screened-off area for smokers behind floor-to-ceiling glass windows.

But it must be less attractively decorated than the rest of the cafe, and no food or drink is allowed to be served inside.

The Netherlands is a signatory to the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control signed by 168 states and which entered into force in February 2005.

And Clean Air Nederland put forward the convention as the basis for its argument in court for a total ban.

But lawyers for the government said it is working "as part of a process" towards the "final result in which there are no cigarettes in 100 percent of all public places" adding no deadline had been set to implement a total ban.

The existing arrangements meant "people can go to these places and not be bothered by cigarette smoke," said lawyer Bert-Jan Houtzagers.

The court in The Hague is due to deliver its ruling in about six weeks.

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