Global gov'ts: Make tobacco firms liable for smoking harm

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In this Nov. 3, 2016 file photo, an Indian man smokes a cigarette in New Delhi, India. A global conference on tobacco control has pledged to hold the tobacco industry legally liable for health consequences of smoking and protect public health policies from the influence of tobacco companies.Representatives from around 180 countries participating in the World Health Organization's global tobacco control treaty negotiations on Saturday adopted a declaration in which they also vowed to prohibit or regulate the sale of e-cigarettes. (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri, File)

A global conference on tobacco control has pledged to hold the tobacco industry legally liable for health consequences of smoking and protect public health policies from the influence of tobacco companies.

Representatives from around 180 countries participating in the World Health Organization's global tobacco control treaty negotiations on Saturday adopted a declaration in which they also vowed to prohibit or regulate the sale of e-cigarettes.

The six-day conference on the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, or FCTC, concluded with participating countries agreeing to promote alternative livelihoods for tobacco farmers that would ensure a better future for them.

Public health activists say smoking-related deaths are still rising worldwide, with 80 percent of them expected to occur in developing countries by 2030. The WHO says that without strong control measures, tobacco will kill about 1 billion people in the 21st century.

The more than 1,500 delegates expressed their concern about persistent attempts by the tobacco industry to infiltrate the meetings in order to influence the working and the outcomes of the conference.

The declaration cautioned governments against efforts by big tobacco companies to dilute health policies, subvert measures to restrict tobacco sales and undermine the implementation of the FCTC.

"The long hours of debate and planning has produced a strong road map for global tobacco control for the future," Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva, head of the convention secretariat, told reporters.

In this Nov. 2, 2016 file photo, an Indian man takes a cigarette from a pack in New Delhi, India. A global conference on tobacco control has pledged to hold the tobacco industry legally liable for health consequences of smoking and protect public health policies from the influence of tobacco companies.Representatives from around 180 countries participating in the World Health Organization's global tobacco control treaty negotiations on Saturday adopted a declaration in which they also vowed to prohibit or regulate the sale of e-cigarettes. (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri)

She said the tobacco industry was "determined to undermine and distract us from our goal—to fight against the tobacco epidemic that not only damages health and kills people, but also impoverishes those living in low- to middle-income countries."

The conference declaration included measures to hold big tobacco companies liable for the health consequences of its products, recover health care costs and facilitate access to justice for victims of tobacco-

related diseases.

Since they set down stiff regulations and guidelines in the landmark 2003 FCTC treaty—the first and only global treaty dealing with public health—most of the 180 signatories have ratified it and passed laws restricting tobacco advertising or sales.

Still, many governments remain entangled with powerful tobacco companies, while industry lobbyists continue attempts to stymie efforts to implement anti-smoking laws through bribery, misinformation and even suing national governments for lost profits, campaigners say.

Health activists hailed the decision on legal liability, saying it could set a precedent for holding other industries accountable for environmental damage or public health harms they could cause.

"The tobacco industry is the single largest barrier to tobacco control policies globally—and these negotiations were no exception," said John Stewart, deputy campaigns director at the Boston-based lobbying group Corporate Accountability International.

Stewart said the firm stand taken by delegates, who stood up to the tobacco industry, had enabled governments to adopt "some of the strongest measures yet to protect millions of people's lives."

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