

Big tobacco snubs health warning law in Indonesia (Update)

24 June 2014, by Margie Mason



New packs of cigarettes displaying pictorial health warnings are arranged on the counter by a shop attendant for photographers at a convenience store in Jakarta, Indonesia, Tuesday, June 24, 2014. Tobacco companies on Tuesday largely snubbed an Indonesian law requiring them to put graphic photo warnings on all cigarette packs being sold, marking another setback in a country that's home to the world's highest rate of men smokers and a wild, wild west of advertising. (AP Photo/Tatan Syuflana)

Tobacco companies have largely snubbed an Indonesian law requiring them to put graphic health warnings on all cigarette packs, another setback for anti-smoking efforts in a country that's home to the world's highest rate of male smokers and a wild, wild west of advertising.

Despite having a year and a half to prepare the warning photos that are to cover 40 percent of cigarette packs, most tobacco companies failed to meet Tuesday's deadline, according to the National Commission for Child Protection. It found little sign of change in brands being sold in Jakarta and 11 other cities across the sprawling archipelago.

"This clearly indicates that the cigarette industry

has defied Indonesian law," said commission chair Arist Merdeka Sirait. "The government has been defeated by the cigarette industry."

Only 409 of the more than 3,300 brands owned by 672 companies nationwide had registered the photos they plan to use on their products as of Monday, according to the Food and Drug Monitoring Agency. They were given a choice between five different images last June.

Health Minister Nafsiah Mboi said companies that missed the deadline will be issued warnings, and those that fail to comply could eventually be fined up to \$42,000 and face five years in prison.

"If they are still dragging their feet, that means they willingly refuse to comply," she said.

An Associated Press photographer visited five vendors in Jakarta on Tuesday before finding a convenience store that had just received a shipment of new cigarettes with graphic warnings. None was on display.

Indonesia's biggest cigarette producer, Philip Morris-owned Sampoerna, said it began distributing products with the new warnings on Monday, but needed more time to clear out existing stock. But the law states that the labels must be displayed on shelves by Tuesday.

"We believe the government will implement the regulation consistently and fairly, so as to realize a climate of healthy competition among cigarette manufacturers, as well as providing clear information about the impact of smoking on health," Sampoerna spokesman Tommy Hersyaputera said.

Indonesia has a long history of delaying tobacco regulations and is one of the few countries that has not joined a World Health Organization tobacco treaty. The order has taken years to reach President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's desk, and

he still has not signed it. He will leave office in October after elections next month.

Tobacco control is particularly contentious in the country, which is the world's fifth-largest cigarette producer and is eyed as an important growth market for tobacco companies. Farmers hold rowdy protests when restrictions are proposed, and lobbyists maintain tight connections with politicians in a government rife with graft.

As a result, little action is taken and tobacco advertising is ubiquitous. Towering billboards and LED screens scream messages such as, "Marlboro Ice Blast ... crush it, unleash it" to motorists stuck in Jakarta's infamous traffic jams. A bright blue advertisement for Clas mild cigarettes stretches across a concourse at the main international airport telling passengers to "Act Now! Talk less do more." Tobacco commercials on television, long banned in the West, are still broadcast. And sports and entertainment events are frequently sponsored by the industry.



A shop attendant gives change to a customer as cigarettes packages are displayed behind the counter at a convenience store in Jakarta, Indonesia, Tuesday, June 24, 2014. Tobacco companies on Tuesday largely snubbed an Indonesian law requiring them to put graphic photo warnings on all cigarette packs being sold, marking another setback in a country that's home to the world's highest rate of men smokers and a wild, wild west of advertising. (AP Photo/Tatan Syuflana)

The cigarette pictorial warnings were part of health regulations passed in 2009 that mandated bans on tobacco advertising and smoking in public places, but implementation and enforcement continues to lag. It's still common for smokers to light up in restaurants and hotels, though venues such as airports and malls in bigger cities now offer smoking rooms. Tobacco-related illnesses kill at least 200,000 each year in the country, which has a population of around 240 million.

"By implementing the new health warnings ... the government of Indonesia will put up a roadblock for an industry that sells only death and disease," Mark Hurley, head of Indonesia programs for the U.S.-based group Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, wrote in an email. "Tobacco companies in Indonesia are trying to delay putting the warnings on their packs because they know the warnings work."

A national survey in 2012 found that 67 percent of all males over age 15 smoke—the world's highest rate—while 35 percent of the total population lights up, surpassed only by Russia.

Most Indonesian men buy strong and pungent kreteks, filled with a mix of tobacco and cloves. But so-called white cigarettes, such as U.S.-based Philip Morris International's Marlboro, have become more popular in recent years. All brands are cheap, selling for about \$1 a pack or a few cents per cigarette, making it easy for children to take up the habit.

"The tobacco industry has had the longest implementation time in Asia—18 months," Mary Assunta, senior policy adviser at the Southeast Asian Tobacco Control Alliance, wrote in an email. "During that time 285,000 people died in Indonesia from tobacco-related diseases. ... The industry must be compliant, but looks like they have little respect for the law."

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