

Japan's obstructionist position on illicit trade protocol



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Negotiations toward a protocol on illicit tobacco trade to the global tobacco treaty, formally known as the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC), were held earlier this month.

The illicit tobacco trade makes up approximately 10 percent of global tobacco sales and costs governments between 40-50 billion dollars (27-34 billion euros) every year.

"Transnational companies benefit in a number of ways from the illicit trade in tobacco," said Kathryn Mulvey, Director of International Policy, Corporate Accountability International (CAI).

While many countries voiced their commitment to a protocol that will require tobacco corporations to assume responsibility for their supply chains, provide financial disincentives to the illicit tobacco trade, and prevent government collaboration with the tobacco industry, Japan earned the first Marlboro Man Award of the protocol negotiations.

The Marlboro Man Award, bestowed by the Network for Accountability of Tobacco Transnationals (NATT), exposes and challenges countries for espousing treaty positions that benefit the tobacco industry at the expense of public health.

The award is named after Philip Morris's notorious advertising icon, which has played a central role in spreading tobacco addiction globally. On the strength of the Marlboro Man advertising and promotional campaign, Marlboro became the world's leading cigarette brand, and Philip Morris/Altria (soon to split into Philip Morris USA and Philip Morris International) became the world's largest and most profitable tobacco transnational.

In its opening comments during the above illicit tobacco trade negotiations, Japan questioned the value of a potential protocol and suggested that the illicit tobacco trade could be tackled at the domestic level and through existing trade and intellectual property agreements. The Japanese government owns a 50% stake in Japan Tobacco, the world's third largest tobacco corporation, and was sharply criticized throughout the FCTC talks for advocating positions that served the interests of Big Tobacco.

"Tobacco industry interference poses a huge threat to implementation of the global tobacco treaty," said Mulvey.

"Governments and civil society must be vigilant to ensure that this vital protocol is not derailed."

"Considering that Japan Tobacco's products are being smuggled into West African markets like Nigeria, we're concerned that the Japanese government has a conflict of interest in these negotiations," says Akinbode Oluwafemi of Environmental Rights Action Nigeria, also a NATT member.

"Reversing this entirely preventable epidemic [tobacco epidemic] must now rank as a top priority for public health and for political leaders in every country of the world" had said Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of the WHO to mark the release of the Global Tobacco Epidemic Report (2008) of World Health Organization released earlier this month.

But without holding tobacco corporations accountable and monitoring them stringently to ensure that effective tobacco control policies work with the utmost impact, reversing the global tobacco epidemic shall remain a daunting challenge.

Tobacco corporations across the world have been not only aggressively protecting and promoting their tobacco markets, particularly in the developing countries, but also trying their best to either abort or weaken the public health policies that begin to take shape in countries around the world.

Alert monitoring of tobacco corporations and holding them accountable for violating existing health policies in present and the past will help reduce the tobacco use globally.

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