

So sad but the tobacco boys are...laughing all the way to the bank

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THE Deputy Internal Security Minister enumerated to Dewan Negara last month that among the factors contributing to drug abuse among teenagers were loose religious and family values, lack of sport facilities and poor living environment. But he left out cigarettes — the gateway drug.

Given the rather uneventful World No Tobacco Day 2006 celebrated on May 31, this was rather telling.

In contrast, a major tobacco company here took the opportunity to highlight its nett profits for the first quarter of the year, which was 20 per cent higher than the previous corresponding period, even though it claimed to be under pressure following tax hikes.

In fact, looking ahead, analysts forecast that the earnings for the company are expected to improve compared to that of last year. It is expected to pay "good dividends".

In other words, the industry is very much active and influential in determining the health status of many Malaysians.

This raised a dim prospect of reducing the number of smokers from the more than three million Malaysians, about half of whom are adult men who light up regularly.

The number of smokers is reportedly increasing by up to 20 per cent annually.

The number of deaths due to smoking-related ailments is expected to exceed the annual 10,000 mark in the years to come.

This means a health burden on the people and economic loss borne by the Government and taxpayers.

To quote the Minister of Health: "If the situation is allowed to continue it will only grow worse in the near future. We must act."

Unfortunately, what these actions are that could prevent the future from worsening remains still very vague.

For a start, surf the Ministry of Health's Tobacco Control Unit website <http://dph.gov.my/dcd/kpas/tc/index.htm>. As of May 31, there was no mention of World No Tobacco Day this year or the previous two years. The last update was in 2003.

Although a ban on cigarette advertisements was put in place a few years ago, advertising at the point-of-sale, be it in restaurants, coffee shops and supermarkets, seems to be left untouched.

The Tak Nak campaign — an anti-smoking campaign supposed to run over five years — seems to have been stopped abruptly. We hear little of it of late, or of the proposed graphic labelling which is yet to be implemented.

To make matters worse, recall how the tobacco barons won almost hands down when Kuala Lumpur became the dubious host to the "Emerging Tobacco Markets" exposition in November 2005.

The exposition was aimed at strategising how to further exploit Asia, the most important future market for the global tobacco industry.

All these despite the fact that Malaysia having ratified the World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in September, just two months earlier. Even now, while at long last there is a ray of hope that small cigarette packs have been banned (beginning June 1), its effective enforcement is still uncertain.

As in the case of the F1 sponsorship, although the ban took effect in the beginning of this year, the March race in Sepang remained unaffected.

What seems puzzling is that although Malaysia is a relatively small market for tobacco in Asia, it is trying very hard to be a strategic regional player by accommodating the world's big tobacco boys.

More puzzling still, unlike Indonesia with its kretek (clove cigarette) industry or that of Thailand, where the tobacco monopoly is controlled by established local brands, Malaysia has no local brand of its own.

Yet the authorities seem to have no qualms working hand-in-glove with the merchants of death. By so doing, it

has lost the moral authority to tell its citizens to stop smoking — hence the weak response and action taken thus far.

The tobacco industry has no compunction about putting profits before life; and pushing ahead with its expansionary economic goals to the detriment of the health of the people.

The market continues to be flooded with wide variety of tobacco products. After all, according to the global tobacco industry, Asia is "one of the last regions where tobacco consumption still increases every year".

In this context, Malaysia has been singled out by at least one tobacco company as a cash cow to be protected and milked.

Have we become resigned to the fact that our citizens will be sacrificial lambs for the tobacco industry?

The theme of 'World No Tobacco Day 2006' — Tobacco: Deadly in Any Form or Disguise — is a wake up call. No less than the dreaded abuse of drugs, tobacco addiction is today a global epidemic that is increasingly ravaging this country.

It should be clear by now in our attempt to nurture human capital, that we can least afford the toll of disability, disease, lost productivity and what else, death associated to cigarette smoking.

In short, we have no choice but to really come down hard in curbing tobacco use, just like any conventional substance of abuse.

This is an act that is long overdue, for otherwise, it will be deadly business as usual in stark contradiction the National Mission in letter and spirit as envisioned in the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

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