

Stop the 'Asian tobacco connection'

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ONE of the predictions for the Year of the Rooster is that the benchmark Kuala Lumpur Composite Index (KLCI) will hit a range between 900 and 1,000 points this year.

It looks like the Rooster promises a healthy year for the business community, especially the so-called earth industries which include those in agriculture and plantation sector.

But this may not be so for Malaysia's largest tobacco company. In a statement last week (NST, Feb 9), it said it expects a decline in the cigarette market which it squarely blamed on the tax imposed during the recent Budget.

This contradicts an earlier news report that the company will experience an increase in sales volume by at least one per cent over last year, according to an industry analyst. Moreover, the same company also announced its highest share price increase over the last five months, that is, since September 2004.

Whatever is the case, the number of deaths due to smoking continues to escalate but the tobacco industry just does not care. Instead, the industry continues with its aggressive promotion.

Come November, intentionally or otherwise, Kuala Lumpur will be given the "dubious" honour to host the region's largest tobacco trade conference and exposition (www.etm2005.com).

Called the "Emerging Tobacco Markets 2005", it claims to be a "unique" platform for all members of the Asian tobacco industry, including China, Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Thailand, Korea, Japan, Philippines, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Dubbed "the Asian tobacco connection", it firmly puts Malaysia at the heart of lucrative hub for the region's tobacco industry.

Malaysia once again will be perceived as a keen supporter of the tobacco industry and, by extension, a promoter of the well-known killer product that the developed world is eager to dump.

And, as always, developing countries like Malaysia are poised for this role despite, of late, the strong and determined high-level statements and actions to stem out tobacco-related promotions.

What impact will this new tobacco industry offensive have on Malaysia's recent initiatives like the *Tak Nak!* (Say No!) campaign?

Is this not an affront to the Prime Minister's call against tobacco when he personally launched the *Tak Nak!* campaign just a year ago?

What about the state of confusion and disarray it will cause, among the public, especially the youngsters, who are now beginning to accept that smoking is bad for health and that tobacco is a drug that kills?

For sure, whatever little that has been achieved thus far will most certainly be wiped out in a wink — a consequence so embarrassingly characteristic of Malaysia's flip-flopping tobacco control policy.

Worse still, as Malaysia is the 63rd signatory to the World Health Organisation-sponsored Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the world's first public health treaty, which will come to effect on Feb 27.

The then Minister of Health had described the event as "a happy day and a victory for health and a blow to the tobacco industry".

How can all these, niceties be reconciled in the eyes of the world? We have no choice but to act firmly and swiftly to save the situation (and our dignity), by re-asserting our uncompromising position once again — namely the commitment to the creation of a tobacco-free Malaysia.

We must not relent one bit when dealing with tobacco, lest we be overwhelmed by the unscrupulous merchants of death.

Malaysians are therefore urged to join "The Million Signature Campaign" aimed at getting the Government to take all necessary actions to stop the tobacco exposition in November.

We must make it clear that as health-conscious Malaysians, tobacco has no place in this society, much like all other addictive substances.

After all, cigarettes are now considered by the Government as the "gateway" to Malaysia's drug abuse problem — one that has taken so much of the country's resources and lives prematurely.

We must act now.

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