

Address by

DR ALA ALWAN  
REGIONAL DIRECTOR

## **WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION** **on the occasion of** **WORLD NO TOBACCO DAY**

**31 May 2015**

On this World No Tobacco Day, our focus is to stop the illicit trade in tobacco products. Our region is in danger. The health of our people is being compromised by this trade. I am therefore calling on all concerned stakeholders to work together, to eliminate the illicit tobacco trade.

Illicit tobacco products find their way into and out of the countries of the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. Cigarettes, waterpipe tobacco and smokeless tobacco are being smuggled across borders. Every year, governments of the world are losing US\$ 40.5 billion in revenue from the illicit trade in tobacco products. In some countries, the illicit trade can account for as much as 50% of the market share. The fact that such trade is more prominent in low- and middle-income countries than in high-income countries places many of the countries of the Region at risk. The gains we have made so far in tobacco control are compromised by this illegal operation. In addition, the accessibility of smuggled products leads to greater use of tobacco products and thus more ill health.

Although cigarettes are by far the most frequent illicit tobacco product, they are by no means the only one. From 2012 to 2013, the amount of smuggled smokeless tobacco that was seized rose from 8 to 38 tonnes, while waterpipe tobacco seizures rose from 69 to 75 tonnes. These illicit products are untaxed and unregulated, carry no health warnings, and meet no packing or labelling requirements. This makes them cheaper and thus more readily accessible, especially to young and poor people, diluting the impact of tobacco control policies or measures taken by governments.

Today, tobacco continues to pose a real threat to public health. Nearly 6 million people die every year from direct tobacco use and exposure to second-hand smoke. Our data indicate that tobacco use in many countries of the Region is very high, with up to 36% of adolescents aged 13–15 years and 32% of people aged over 15 years using tobacco. Among men, tobacco use can exceed 50% in some countries.

Tobacco use also represents a serious challenge to ongoing efforts to prevent noncommunicable diseases in many countries. Noncommunicable diseases, particularly heart disease, stroke, cancers, chronic lung disease and diabetes, are the leading cause of premature death in countries of the Region, responsible for over 57% of all deaths.



**World Health  
Organization**

Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

Two-thirds of these premature deaths are linked to exposure to common risk factors, including tobacco use.

Fortunately, every problem has a solution. The solution to this problem is the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products. This is the first protocol to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control – the world's first ever public health treaty. Eliminating the illicit trade in tobacco products will: lower consumption, reduce premature deaths and increase government revenues.

If we eliminate illicit trade, it is projected that governments around the world would gain at least US\$ 31.3 billion every year; and from 2030 onwards, that more than 164 000 premature deaths every year would be avoided, the vast majority of which would be in middle- and low-income countries.

Who is behind the illicit tobacco products trade? A very powerful, highly networked and persistent opponent: the tobacco industry. Since 2004, the four major international tobacco companies have paid billions of dollars in fines and payments to settle cigarette smuggling litigation in Europe and Canada.

The tobacco industry is trying to hijack the Protocol to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, by approaching countries to discuss solutions to the illicit trade, and by holding national and regional meetings.

However, the solution is unambiguous. Entry into force of the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products will require international cooperative measures to control the supply chain and thus puts the solution in the hands of governments.

On This World No Tobacco Day, I call upon countries to commit to and become Party to the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products.

