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Smoking could kill 1 billion this century: WHO

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By Ed Cropley

BANGKOK (Reuters) - One billion people will die of tobacco-related diseases this century unless governments in rich and poor countries alike get serious about preventing smoking, top World Health Organization (WHO) experts said on Monday.

"Tobacco is a defective product. It kills half of its customers," Douglas Bettcher, head of the WHO's Tobacco Free Initiative, said at the start of an international conference in Bangkok to draw up a masterplan for the world to kick the habit.

"It kills 5.4 million people per year and half of those deaths are in developing countries. That's like one jumbo jet going down every hour," he said.

With smoking rates in many developing countries on the rise, particularly among teenagers, that annual death toll would rise to 8.3 million within the next 20 years, he added.

However, if governments introduced measures such as aggressive taxation, banning cigarette advertising and making offices and public places totally tobacco-free, smoking rates could halve by 2050, he said.

"It's a completely preventable epidemic," Bettcher said, citing countries such as Singapore, Australia and Thailand where tough anti-smoking laws have helped people to quit.

"If we do that, by 2050 we can save 200 million lives."

Officials from 147 countries are attending the week-long conference, which is likely to agree on binding laws against cross-border tobacco advertising -- a move against events such as Formula One -- as well as tougher legislation against cigarette smuggling.

Around 600 billion cigarettes were smuggled in 2006 -- 11 percent of the world's consumption -- according to the Framework Convention Alliance (FAC), an umbrella group of hundreds of anti-tobacco organizations.

As well as keeping the prices artificially low and thereby stimulating demand, the counterfeit cigarette industry also deprives governments of more than \$40 billion in missed taxes, the FCA estimates.

BAN ON ADS

In Thailand, smoking rates have fallen from 30 percent in 1992 to around 18 percent, a decline health officials attribute to a ban on all domestic tobacco advertising 15 years ago.

"The most important medicines in tobacco control are: number one, increasing taxation; number two, bans on advertising; and number three, smoke-free public places," said Hatai Chitanondh of the Thailand Health Promotion Institute.

Besides agreeing laws on cross-border advertising and smuggling, the conference is also likely to issue guidelines for

countries introducing legislation on "second-hand smoke" and "smoke-free" areas.

Although not legally binding, anti-smoking campaigners are delighted with the explicit wording of the guidelines.

"There is no safe level of exposure to tobacco smoke and notions such as a threshold value for toxicity from second-hand smoke should be rejected as they are contradicted by scientific evidence," a draft copy of the guidelines said.

"Approaches other than 100 percent smoke-free environments, including ventilation, air filtration and use of designated smoking areas have repeatedly been shown to be ineffective."

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