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PRESS RELEASE: 'World No Tobacco Day' - 31st May 2023

The 2023 global campaign for World No Tobacco Day, the annual celebration which falls on the 31st of May, will be launched under the theme, **"We need food, not tobacco,"** as announced by the World Health Organization (WHO). The campaign aims to raise awareness about alternative crop production and marketing opportunities for tobacco farmers worldwide, encouraging them to grow sustainable, nutritious crops.

The world is facing a devastating global food crisis at present, induced by a combination of factors such as conflict, climate change, COVID-19 pandemic and soaring food prices. The situation is worsened in Sri Lanka with the prevailing economic and political crisis, the worst in its history since its independence in 1948. Drastic price increases of most food items resulting from the crisis have cast great hardship upon the citizens, leading to 6.3 million people in Sri Lanka being "food insecure," according to the World Food Programme (WFP).

Amidst this difficult economic situation, the added disease and economic burden due to tobacco use is clearly unnecessary. Indubitably being a deadly product, tobacco kills around 20,000 people every year in Sri Lanka, which amounts to 55 deaths per day, as reported by the Ministry of Health. In addition, Sri Lankans spend approximately LKR 400 million per day on cigarettes, while the government bears health and economic loss of LKR 84,320 million per year due to cigarette use. Moreover, it has been identified through studies that the majority of smokers belong to the low-income category. Therefore, spending their hard-earned money on tobacco products has a large impact on the household income, which has become a major cause of food insecurity among such families. With the present situation, it is essential to deviate from the habit of tobacco use and focus more on obtaining access to healthy and nutritious food, 'as it is food that people need, not tobacco.'

Furthermore, tobacco cultivation causes reduction in land productivity due to severe soil erosion, downstream sedimentation and depletion of water resources. Heavy chemical application during tobacco cultivation causes a large threat to the environment as well as the health of farmers and their families. In addition, tobacco depletes soil nutrients due to rapid intake of nutrients from the soil. Ultimately, tobacco cultivation leads to reduction in soil fertility, causing the land to become less suitable to grow other more important food crops.

Therefore, the agricultural sector in Sri Lanka requires interventions to improve production capacity for nutritious and sustainable crops, thereby reducing import requirements amid shortages of foreign currency reserves, which will eventually result in averting the food crisis.

In 2017, Dr. Rajitha Senaratne, Minister of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine stated in an international conference that Sri Lanka intends to phase out from tobacco cultivation by 2021, in accordance with Article 17 and 18 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC), encouraging farmers to move on to alternative livelihoods to tobacco growing. Yet, even after a grace period of five years, the decision has still not come into effect, and the reason behind it should be none other than the interferences by the tobacco industry.

It is no secret that over the years, the tobacco industry has reached the policy makers through various interventions to weaken the important policy decisions, sustain tobacco cultivation and promote their image. Even though the tobacco industry often boasts about itself as an advocate for the livelihood of tobacco farmers, it is a far cry from the truth. The tobacco industry's effort to greenwash tobacco as a sustainable home garden crop is also in vain.

With this situation, strong tobacco control measures are required at present to reduce usage and associated harm and bring a satisfactory revenue to the government. Significantly increasing excise taxes and prices has been identified as the single most effective and cost-effective strategy for tobacco control. At present, there is no scientific indexation policy in Sri Lanka, where the level of cigarette taxation is adjusted to the inflation. But rather, cigarette tax is determined based on a complex, yet outdated method, where the tax is adjusted to the length of cigarettes.

Due to several forces acting through the Ministry of Finance, there is a delay in taking the relevant measures to establish a rational, scientific cigarette tax policy within the country, which has resulted in a lost revenue of approximately LKR 200 billion within the past five years. British American Tobacco (BAT), the monopoly which controls 84.13% of the shares of the Ceylon Tobacco Company (CTC), has been accumulating this lost revenue as profits, draining money out of the country at a period where the country is at a difficult economic juncture.

Therefore, Alcohol and Drug Information Centre (ADIC) kindly requests from all professionals, academics, religious leaders, journalists and citizens to pressurize responsible individuals and authorities to take required action to establish scientific, rational tobacco control measures, alleviating the health and economic harm associated with it. Also, the current situation in the country has provided an ideal opportunity for policymakers to revamp the sluggish transformation programme to phase-out from tobacco cultivation and promote household food security. Therefore, the responsible parties should develop the agricultural sector of Sri Lanka to focus on moving on to cultivation of more nutritious food crops, reducing imports and paving the way to a self-sufficient nation in the long run.

Alcohol & Drug Information Centre (ADIC)