
Statement by Ambassador Juan Martabit, President of the second session of the Conference of the Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control

Your Excellency Mr Paiboon Wattanasiritham, Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand, Dr Anarfi Asamoah-Baah, Deputy Director-General of the World Health Organization, Dr Samlee Plianbangchang, WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia, distinguished Ministers and Heads of Delegations, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great honour for me to preside over this session of the Conference of the Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and to extend a warm welcome to you, confident that we shall be able to achieve significant results by the end of the Conference.

It is a matter of public knowledge, and a fact of which we are all well aware, that tobacco is the principal cause of preventable death in the world, with five million tobacco-related deaths every year, or more than 13 500 deaths a day. Half of the world's children are exposed to tobacco smoke in their homes. I do not need to refer to the serious health problems caused by tobacco consumption. We know all too well that no other consumer product is so dangerous and kills so many people as tobacco.

To prevent these evils, and as evidence of the global awareness of this serious public-health problem, the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control currently has 168 signatories, and 148 other States have ratified the Convention as of 20 June 2007.

As you know, the Framework Convention is posited on the following basic principles:

- Protecting children and young people against tobacco, mainly by discouraging them from taking up smoking;
- Helping smokers to kick the habit;
- Protecting non-smokers against exposure to second-hand smoke;
- Regulating tobacco products.

Tobacco control efforts have made headway since February 2006. At least five workshops have been organized to implement the Framework Convention. Two working groups have been formed to develop guiding principles for the application of the Convention and have held regular meetings to draft the relevant instruments. Experts have met on a number of occasions to elaborate protocols on

illicit trade in tobacco products and tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship; the results are contained in the working documents of the Conference and we shall have occasion to discuss them at length over the next few days at the Conference.

Equally important has been the contribution of WHO in developing the capacity of Member States to implement the Framework Convention. Likewise, the Global Tobacco Surveillance System, which is intended to track tobacco consumption and other related factors in different populations, has been a valuable tool for monitoring tobacco use worldwide.

The efforts made by WHO in the field of communication are exemplified by the recent World No Tobacco Day. The central theme chosen for 2007 was “completely smoke-free environments”.

Since June this year we have had a new Head of the Secretariat of the Framework Convention. Following an extensive selection procedure, Dr Haik Nikogosian was formally appointed to this position by the Director-General some two weeks ago. Dr Nikogosian is a recognized professional with very extensive experience, which includes holding the post of Minister of Health in his native country, Armenia. He has also been involved in a number of activities relating to our Convention. Let me also congratulate Dr Nikogosian, of whom we can expect much in his new and challenging role.

I am also pleased to congratulate Dr Douglas Bettcher for taking over coordination of the Tobacco Free Initiative at WHO, where I am sure that his vast experience and wholehearted commitment, with which we are all familiar, will be of great assistance to us in our forthcoming work.

As you recall, our work at the first session of the Conference of the Parties focused primarily on laying the groundwork for the operation of the Framework Convention. At this second session of the Conference, we will receive the first reports on the implementation of the Framework Conference. We shall also have to take a decision on the two templates for protocols on the illicit trade in tobacco products and cross-border tobacco advertising, and elaborate guidelines for the implementation of the Framework Convention.

As at the first session, the work ahead of us will not be without difficulties, but I have no doubt that the outcome will be very positive thanks to all your contributions. I wish to state that the Bureau over which I have the honour to preside will be at the disposal of all delegations to assist you in any way necessary to ensure the successful conclusion of our work.

Let me conclude these brief remarks by highlighting the valuable efforts you have made in your respective countries to implement the Framework Convention. I know the task has not been easy. Powerful vested interests have tried not only to block the ratification of this instrument, but also to limit its scope when attempts have been made to apply its provisions in draft legislation currently pending before your respective parliaments.

Every day we gain new and determined allies from every section of society, without distinction, and among whom I particularly wish to single out young people who desire a better quality of life and want to enjoy themselves and develop in an untainted environment. Many of these young people are represented in the nongovernmental organizations that currently work with us. We acknowledge their efforts and we want their initiatives to flourish.

It also seems to me that the time has come to strengthen bilateral alliances between countries or even regions. In this way we can join forces to achieve our common goals.

Accordingly I am very pleased to be able to mention the PAHO/WHO workshop in Santiago de Chile that sketched out the preliminary outline of what could turn out to be a regional programme under the Framework Convention. I would urge all regions to pursue similar initiatives.

Be that as it may, the efforts made by States that have ratified the Convention and the States which we hope will ratify it will help to save millions of lives, save significant health resources and boost productivity that is now being wasted. In short, these efforts will improve the quality of life of millions of people who have high hopes of the outcome of this Conference.

Thank you very much.

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