

OFFICIALS SUSPECT TOBACCO INDUSTRY HOLDING UP PROCESS

Flood of letters stalls India's tougher smoking laws

Government has vowed to read all public suggestions, including more than 100,000 letters

NEW DELHI – Bulging sacks of letters gathering dust at India's health ministry are the latest obstacle to a push for tougher laws to curb smoking, as more than 100,000 unread messages from

members of the public overwhelm officials and stall legislation.

With tobacco linked to up to 900,000 deaths a year in India, the government wants to raise the mini-

mum smoking age to 21 from 18, and ban the sale of single cigarettes, which make up 70 per cent of overall sales.

Before taking its proposals to Parliament, the government in January



With tobacco linked to up to 900,000 deaths a year in India, the government wants to raise the minimum smoking age to 21 from 18, and ban the sale of single cigarettes, which account for 70 per cent of overall sales.

PHOTO: REUTERS

asked for public suggestions. The result was unprecedented: 45,000 emails and more than 100,000 letters delivered by mail, in white and brown sacks stacked up in the health ministry, beside the desks of officials working on computers.

Analysing and collating public responses is crucial for the legislative process to move forward. The sheer volume has left officials stumped, with some fearing that it could take as much as five months to sift through the letters.

Some health officials suspect the letter-writing campaign was orchestrated by the tobacco industry to hold up the process.

"It appears to be an organised campaign as a lot of letters were photocopied and sent in same-coloured envelopes from one town or village," said a health ministry official, who sought anonymity as he is not authorised to speak to the media.

While there is no evidence to back up such suspicions, there are signs of an organised letter-writing campaign.

At least one pack of letters seen by Reuters consisted of dozens of the same printed objections signed by different people. Several protest emails came from employees of India's largest cigarette maker, ITC Ltd.

A company spokesman said ITC did not ask employees to send letters. Mr Sameer Shaikh, a sales executive with ITC, said he and his wife wrote in, fearing job cuts.

"People will lose jobs because of these laws," said Mr Shaikh's wife, Shiren.

The government says it is keen to cut tobacco consumption, but health activists say a strong tobacco lobby is pressuring it to go slow.

Industry body the Tobacco Institute of India declined comment.

"New tobacco laws are the need of the hour and need effective enforcement," said Ms Monika Arora, of the Framework Convention Alliance for Tobacco Control.

The government has vowed to read all the public suggestions.

"Given the number, it is likely to take some time," said Mr C K Mishra, an additional secretary at the health ministry, but he did not estimate how long. **REUTERS**

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