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SOUTHEAST ASIA TOBACCO CONTROL ALLIANCE

Contact: Ms. Joy F. Alampay, SEATCA Communications Manager, +63917-5326749,
email: joy@seatca.org

ASEAN-wide effort crucial to WHO FCTC progress in Southeast Asia – SEATCA

30 May 2011- (Bangkok) - As smoking declines in developed countries -- thanks to progressive policies, public awareness, and strict enforcement of international treaties -- Southeast Asia remains a coveted and vulnerable target of aggressive tobacco companies.

In Southeast Asia where tobacco use is growing fastest due to a huge population and targeted tobacco industry campaigns, 30.4 percent of the adult population are smokers. Most tobacco related deaths occur among working-age adults, and the poorest sectors of society are the most vulnerable and affected.

Because of this, tobacco control advocates in the region say that it is essential to have an ASEAN-wide effort to enforce the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) to protect the people of Southeast Asia, not only from lives lost, but also from the economic burden of tobacco use. With a population of close to 574 million, and a market dominated by young adults, Southeast Asian countries like Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, the Philippines and Vietnam are being targeted by tobacco marketing practices, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities and interference to weaken government policies that have long been banished elsewhere.

"The challenge for Southeast Asia is to fortify itself for this continuing and targeted assault on its people, and to catch up with the rest of the world in inoculating itself against the tactics and brute force of tobacco companies," says Bungon Ritthiphakdee, Director of the Bangkok-based Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance (SEATCA). "On the 31st of May, World No Tobacco Day, especially, the tobacco control movement must be raised to the level of ASEAN, not just individual governments."

The WHO FCTC, the very first global health treaty is a very powerful tool to curb the tobacco epidemic that compels its 173 Parties to take strong actions and make steady progress towards achieving 100 percent smoke-free environments, comprehensive tobacco advertising bans, large pictorial health warnings, and more recently, higher tobacco taxes and prices, among many tobacco control measures.

Dr. Ulysses Dorotheo, project director of SEATCA's Southeast Asia Initiative on Tobacco Tax (SEATCA-SITT) notes that "cigarettes remain extremely affordable in Southeast Asia: a pack of Marlboros in the Philippines, Cambodia and Laos costs at less than 80 US cents. Brunei, Thailand and Singapore have demonstrated the power of tax and price increases, and have boosted government revenues while reducing tobacco use and lowering health costs. We need to fight collectively to ensure that public health is prioritized over international trade."



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Adds Ms. Ritthiphakdee: “The call of the WHO on World No Tobacco Day is to ‘Save Lives’, and as of this moment, there are 1 million tobacco deaths every year in Southeast Asia. That’s 20 percent of the global tobacco related deaths. If ASEAN countries work together -- not only as a trade bloc, but as a community -- sharing best practices and encouraging stronger policies, our children or grandchildren will live in a tobacco-free region.”

In Indonesia two out of three men are smokers and more teenagers and women are now smoking. However Indonesia is the only country in Asia that has refused to accede to the tobacco treaty. Indonesia needs to join the rest of Asia in protecting its people from the tobacco scourge.

Margaret Chan, Director-General of the WHO puts forth the strength of the WHO FCTC. “The international community has very few opportunities to protect the world’s population from a cause of massive ill health and premature death. Tobacco Control is unquestionably the greatest of these opportunities, and the WHO FCTC seizes this opportunity.”

The WHO states that “The economic impact of early death, disability and lost productivity contributes to the burden of poverty, retarding national development and further widening health inequities. Tobacco control is not only a public health priority, but also a key development issues.(ENDS.)

For more on the WHO-FCTC, and the 2011 World No Tobacco Day:

★ <http://www.who.int/tobacco/wntd/2011/en/index.html>