

US Expert Pans Brazil for Being Land of Cheap Smoke

Contributed by Irene Lôbo
Wednesday, 23 March 2005

Jonathan Samet, an epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins University in the United States and considered by the scientific community the world's greatest specialist on tobacco, criticized, yesterday, March 22, the cheap prices charged for cigarettes in Brazil.

"Brazil has very strong programs to control smoking, but, on the other hand, it has very inexpensive cigarettes," Samet commented. In his opinion, one of the consequences is that young Brazilians obtain the product very easily.

In the United States, the average price of a pack of cigarettes is US\$ 7. The average price in Brazil is US\$ 0.74. According to Samet, ten American states have already banned smoking in public buildings, bars, and restaurants, and every day the tobacco industry is losing more of its influence.

According to the secretary of Health Protection, Jarbas Barbosa, the Minister of Health, Humberto Costa, has been holding "understandings" with the Minister of Finance, Antônio Palocci, for the purpose of raising taxes on Brazilian cigarettes and thus making the product more expensive.

Raising cigarette prices is also one of the proposals contained in the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control, the first international public health treaty. It has been in effect since February 28.

Brazil was the second country to sign the document but has not yet ratified the treaty with the World Health Organization (WHO). For the country to be part of the Framework Convention, the proposal must be approved by the National Congress.

The document was approved by the Chamber of Deputies in May, 2004, but it has been paralyzed in the Senate since then.

The main obstacle to approval of the agreement is the fact that Brazil is currently the world's largest exporter and second largest producer of tobacco.

Data from the Brazilian Tobacco Growers' Association (Afubra) indicate that the sector does around US\$ 1.4 billion in business each year in Brazil, guaranteeing the livelihood of 200 thousand farmers in the South and 30 thousand in the Northeast.

Brazil has until November 7 of this year to ratify the treaty. If it doesn't, it will remain outside the agreement and won't have access to international funds that will be made available to assist in the transition of farmers who depend upon tobacco cultivation in Brazil.

In ten years the number of smokers in Brazil fell from 30% to 22% of the population. Tobacco is considered the major risk factor for all types of cancer and innumerable cardiovascular diseases.

According to the WHO, around five million people die each year around the world as a result of tobacco consumption. 200 thousand of these deaths occur in Brazil.

Translation: David Silberstein
Agência Brasil