

# Anti-tobacco critics to carry on label fight

## Advice sought overseas after local court setback

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Anti-smoking groups have vowed to seek international support for the push to enlarge health warning labels on cigarette packages.

The Action on Smoking and Health Foundation and the Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance announced its move yesterday.

It follows the Central Administrative Court's ruling to suspend the enforcement of a Public Health Ministry regulation requiring tobacco warning labels to cover 85% of the visible packaging.

The current warning covers 55% of the package.

The activists also slammed tobacco companies for opposing the warning enlargement, saying they were interfering with public health policy.

The case was filed by tobacco giant Philip Morris on June 26. The firm asked the court to abolish the regulation, which was due to take effect on Oct 2.

The court ruled in favour of Philip Morris on Friday to suspend the enforcement of the regulation until the court reaches a final decision.

The court said the regulation was legally problematic and agreed it would cause excessive burdens on the plaintiff.

The ministry will call a meeting today to discuss its next move.

Bungon Ritthiphakdee, Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance's director, said Philip Morris's lawsuit against the ministry interfered with the country's public health policy.

"The issue in this case is not about the size of the warning graphic, it's about interference in policy," she said.

Ms Bungon said public health

activists support the regulation, which is in line with the World Health Organisation's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control that backs the use of health warnings on tobacco products.

She said anti-smoking networks will seek support here and outside the country for the health warning enlargement.

The groups have invited a lawyer from Australia to share experience in fighting lawsuits filed by tobacco companies after the Australian government increased health warning graphics to cover 80% of tobacco packages.

Prakit Vathesatogkit, secretary-general of the Action on Smoking and Health Foundation, said the financial losses the tobacco companies claimed they would face in enlarging the warning labels were not greater than the losses society would face if more people took up smoking.

Philip Morris claimed the health warning enlargement regulation would be a financial burden to the company as it would have to adjust its packaging printing system.

The company also claimed the regulation is unnecessary given that the health risks of smoking are universally known in Thailand.

Dr Prakit, however, said studies have found that not all Thais know the risks.

According to one study, about 77% of Thais know smoking can cause heart disease, while 80% know smoking causes an increased stroke risk.

Ron Borland, from Cancer Council Australia, said studies in Australia found that anti-smoking campaigns and bigger health warnings can influence smokers to quit.

"All smokers understand smoking is harmful but they don't know how harmful it is," Dr Borland said.

About 50% of smokers are more likely to quit smoking after seeing warning graphics on cigarette packages, he said.