Bangladesh: bikers against tobacco

Anyone who has been to South Asia will know that the prevailing sound in many of its bustling cities is that of scooters, small motorcycles, and their larger rickshaw siblings, all popping engines and high pitched, raspy hooters as they weave in and out of the traffic in a chaotic, never ending ballet. What interests the young men who ride the bikes? British American Tobacco (BAT) probably reckons pop music is high on the list, and its Star Search promotion for Benson & Hedges cigarettes is geared to such potential customers. The promotion involves a contest for new rock groups which perform at a concert, with one being awarded a trophy. BAT gives out promotional materials, though no big prizes, and gains massive coverage on broadcast media and in newspapers, where it runs high visibility ads in the weeks leading up to the event.

On 30 May this year, however, a group of scooters and motorcycles converged on Dhaka’s Sheraton Hotel, venue of this year’s Star Search (now in its sixth year), whose riders were far from likely to become BAT customers. These were bikers with a mission, and once at their destination, they presented letters requesting the Sheraton to end its association with Star Search and support the national tobacco control movement instead. They explained to the hotel and the media that Star Search was simply a way of attracting young people to become addicted to cigarettes, and should be banned.

The rally was organised by Pratyasha, an anti-drug organisation, and the Welfare Association for Cancer Care, with participation by Work for a Better Bangladesh. The two-wheel protest was yet another example of the creative tobacco control and advanced networking for which Bangladesh health advocates have become renowned in recent years. And tobacco industry people may care to reflect that none other than BAT itself helped to galvanise many of them into a coalition in response to its outrageous “Voyage of Discovery” by an ocean going yacht, called, with fitting lack of subtlety, the John Player Gold Leaf (see Tobacco Control 2000;9:130–1).

Canada: chicanery in the chicanes

Formula 1 (F1) racing cars fly by so fast it requires slow motion replay to judge what’s really happened. In the whirl and blur of real time action, the Canadian F1 Grand Prix race in Montreal in June appeared to show tobacco control gaining a lap on the smoke industry. On closer examination, however, the image is actually fuzzier, the result less obvious. Michael Schumacher won in Montreal, as almost everywhere else on the F1 circuit, but whose interests are really coming out ahead?

Canada’s Tobacco Act, adopted in 1997, was supposed to put an end to industry sponsorship of sporting and cultural events. Major tennis and golf tournaments, as well as a raft of music, comedy, and fireworks festivals, all managed to free themselves from the grasp of nicotine stained dollars. However, some ash-laden lobbying earned Big Tobacco no less than a seven year reprieve for a “transition period”. Running his own small but plutocratic fiefdom, F1 boss Bernie Ecclestone threatened to cancel the 2004 Canadian event if further exemptions were not accorded. The cartoon on this page highlights one healthy response to the industry’s manipulation and Ecclestone’s strong arm tactics.

After a lengthy, confusing game played out, with the race tentatively cancelled, revived and cancelled again, the Canadian and Quebec government finally conceded Cdn$12 million (US$8.8 million) over three years to “compensate” the five tobacco sponsored teams for having to cover up their logos.

Politicians spun their defeat into a victory, taking credit for having saved a prestigious international event. Tobacco
control advocates from around the world congratulated their Canadian colleagues for ensuring that a tobacco ad-free event was beamed into their countries. Certainly, compared to the Malaysian debacle earlier this year (Malaysia: racing round the hurdles, Tobacco Control 2004;13:106–7), the tobacco presence seemed relatively modest yet, up close, it was far more significant, even if at times more subtle.

Massive, pre-race French and English language press coverage included file photos from earlier Grand Prixs in Montreal, and elsewhere showing “Schumi” and his Marlboro colours and logos as dominant in print as they are on the racetrack. Even without the logos in race and victory podium photos, the Marlboro colours are as evocative as ever. There’s a reason why Philip Morris intends to continue sponsoring Ferrari, even after the European Union’s ban on tobacco advertising comes into force in 2006. The response might not share the sense of urgency and immediacy displayed by Pavlov’s dogs’ rings—smokers are always writing letters to editors hungrily declaring they don’t light up just because they’ve seen an F1 driver on a billboard—but it’s an equally real reaction all the same.

In Montreal, the most cynical element of the industry’s “adaptation” to the law came from Benson & Hedges, which blocked out some letters on its cars’ spoilers to form “Be on Edge”. As edgy as a message can be, it forced viewers to mentally complete the brand name, aided by the usual, evocative yellow and black colours. BAT’s Lucky Strike car placed “Look Left” and “Look Right” on either wing, another cheeky name variation. After the Montreal Grad Prix, four of the top finishers were disqualified for technical violations. Even when the race is over, then, the results are not always what they appear to be. Schumacher continues to win—he took the US Grand Prix a week after Montreal, with his and team mate Rubens Barrichello’s Marlboro logos covered up while those of BAT’s Takuma Sato were not, due to “surrogate advertising for a tobacco product”, but confusion reigns.

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the exercise had also produced wider gains for public health. It reinforced existing tobacco control policies and put tobacco firmly on the agenda, not just in Vietnam, but in all 11 participating countries, whose ministers of health all received detailed information about it. Health officials spoke of excellent inter-agency cooperation and support, and significantly increased knowledge and awareness of the health effects of smoking over a wide ranging population. WHO provided some US$30 500 for the implementation of the policy, making its success seem exceptional value for money, and enabling Vietnam to provide a valuable lead for others to follow.

South Africa: courting success

When Ken Sheppard, possibly the only tobacco control advocate in the world to use a Rolls Royce in his work (see Tobacco Control 2000;9:131), first encountered the Mossel Bay Magistrates Court, it was a horror story of indiscriminate smoking. To Sheppard, who has filed many a pro-health case in the court, it seemed that every one of the several hundred people going about their business there was a smoker. The majority were those summoned to answer various offences, but police officers, lawyers and members of the public were smoking, too. To even suggest making the court smoke-free seemed ludicrous.

By 2002, serious efforts were at last being made to isolate smokers into designated areas, but with little success. Sheppard and his Tobacco Control Centre argued that the only workable solution was to make the court entirely smoke-free; and by 2003, it was. Court security personnel were instructed to order anyone smoking to either leave the building or extinguish their cigarettes immediately. Interestingly, some of the worst offenders and the last to hold out were police and court employees. With the interior now smoke-free, the smokers predictably gathered at the entrance, forming a smoky cloud through which non-smokers had to battle as they went in or out. At last, a senior magistrate decided that enough was enough, and agreed to the court displaying signs in both official languages with the message, “No smoking within 10 metres of entrance”. This, along with large ash bins some 20 metres from the entrance, has at long last done the trick.

The effort required to rid the court of tobacco smoke pollution was enormous, and success was only possible because non-smoking court officials were determined that their workplace should be a healthy environment. Sheppard is modest about his own role in the achievement, which sets a helpful example for other courts in the country; but as he is a person for whom the word “persistent” might have been invented, we can be sure his frequent presence in the court in the course of his work was not unconnected.

Sri Lanka: BAT uses religion, ousts quit charity scheme

In May, Ceylon Tobacco Company (CTC), the Sri Lankan subsidiary of BAT, organised the donation of alms to devotees celebrating Vesak (the birth, attainment of Buddhahood, and passing away of Buddha) at Ranmuthugala Buddhist temple. Its priests were also offered alms the following day by the country’s President at his official residence, reportedly with CTC officials in attendance. Traditional Vesak lanterns made from cartons of CTC’s Gold Leaf cigarettes were also seen at the temple. Ironically, they had been made by residents of a rehabilitation centre for victims of alcohol, tobacco, and heroine.
About 4500 Gold Leaf packets were used to make the lanterns, which were seen by some 20 000 people.

Meanwhile, a more sinister turn of events concerns the Samurdhi government agency, whose work focuses mainly on poverty alleviation. In the past, it has participated in World No Tobacco Day on a significant scale, by running an ingenious smoking cessation scheme that also raises funds for charity. It provides money boxes to young smokers who want to quit, for saving what they would otherwise spend on smoking, then collects the money and uses it to build a house for one of its aid recipients. Many countries would relish such a creative scheme that not only helps people stop smoking, but also produces a highly tangible, worthwhile benefit for the needy. However, a senior government official recently revealed that CTC has offered to build a house every year and make donations to Samurdhi recipients, in place of Samurdhi’s cessation savings scheme. What could more neatly illustrate BAT’s idea of social responsibility?

FCTC: how will they keep pushing?

More clues are emerging about how, apart from using Formula One and a few other high profile renegades, tobacco companies think they can keep on promoting their brands as increasing numbers of countries adopt comprehensive tobacco control laws under the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). In those without existing or effective legislation, of course, an obvious first line of action is to lobby hard to ensure that any new legislation introduced is ineffective. Japan leads the way here, with the ministry of finance, not the health ministry, formulating Japan’s response to the FCTC, due to its status as guardian of the government’s controlling interest in Japan Tobacco (JT).

In such pushover conditions, it is not surprising to find proposed new health warnings for industry apologists to die for, with misleading texts such as “Smoking could be one of the causes of lung cancer for you”; and sentences mentioning “epidemiological studies” which are guaranteed to bore or bamboozle and, seeing it is proposed that the warnings cover only 30% of the pack, be hard to read, too. JT was taking advice from US tobacco companies from as far back as the mid 1980s, and industry documents show that Philip Morris in particular assisted with and sometimes also supervised JT’s actions and statements on smoking and health issues. It looks as though this sort of relationship still exists.
On advertising, Japan’s finance ministry does not seem to understand that a ban on promotion means just that—a ban; instead, it is proposing mere restrictions on tobacco ads, based partly on those tilled old tobacco industry voluntary curbs. Thus Japan is proposing to allow advertisements up to 12 times a year and three times a month in daily newspapers, with no restrictions at all on magazine ads.

Meanwhile, in Europe, the industry has been getting back to basics, trying to prevent ratification or accession to the treaty by governments yet to take such action. In Georgia, for example, industry officials were working with members of the new parliament earlier this year, to try to prevent ratification, and will no doubt be keeping up the pressure to avoid accession. Even in countries with moderately good tobacco control, tobacco companies may still have about a decade of what they would call “a level playing field”—business as usual—while proper enforcement backed up by public support and compliance catches up.

But in countries where reasonably strong legislation already exists, more sinister plans are being hatched. In the UK, where public debate on banning smoking in public places has at last broken through to include cabinet level discussion, the industry must feel particularly vulnerable. Not only have there been widespread reports that a commitment to act will feature in the governing manifesto, but the much cited success story of Ireland’s lead.

The Irish ban on all workplace smoking, including hospitality premises, was fought tooth and nail by the hospitality industry, with the usual support from tobacco interests. Britain would be an even greater loss to the tobacco industry, both in terms of subsequent market decline and the likely international domino effects. Perhaps this is one reason why British American Tobacco (BAT) recently advertised for “Business Managers (Hotels, Bars Restaurants and Clubs)” to “forge lasting strategic relationships with key customers in this dynamic sector… to optimise business performance”. The job involves “building strategic business relationships, influencing customer awareness, planning and executing brand strategies”. This sounds like a two-for-one objective—ensuring any proposed ban is resisted as strongly as possible, and promoting BAT’s brands while they’re at it.

The BAT job ad was illustrated with a sample of what the successful applicants’ diaries might look like, filled with appointments from morning through to the small hours at some of London’s most glamorous hotels, clubs, and bars. Reminiscent of industry attempts to use such venues for promotion in Australia, the ad indicates that existing ad bans are unlikely to be enough to stop the next generation of promotion. Only ensuring that any and every effort to promote tobacco is a serious legal offence, as for heroin or cocaine, can stop it altogether.

Turkey: F1 keeps on coming

Having started in a surreptitious way, the advance of Formula One (F1) on the previously auto-sportingly uninterested people of Turkey went public in 2003, when a curious ceremony was held to begin work on the country’s first F1 track (see Tobacco Control 2003;12:346–8). It was curious not because the prime minister attended, but because he appeared to feel no embarrassment about the site. Any such construction was supposed to be strictly forbidden there, due to it being a protected forest area that also serves as a collection basin for Istanbul’s drinking water. Nor did the premier appear to be concerned about apparently giving in to pressure from F1 bosses to allow tobacco sponsorship as a condition for organising a Turkish F1 race, even though Turkey had passed a total ban on all tobacco promotion. Health advocates got their protests as far as the mayor of Istanbul, who confirmed that the issue was beyond his authority: the prime minister had decided the project should go ahead.

Confusingly, government authorities and the Turkish Automobile Federation subsequently sought to reassure the public health community that the race would, after all, be tobacco-free. If the tobacco companies agreed, presumably they had in mind the sort of “tobacco-free” extravaganza of tobacco

Left: A smoker at Madrid airport blatantly ignores the no-smoking sign behind him. Right: A UK ad placed by BAT, advertising for “Business Managers (Hotels, Bars Restaurants and Clubs)”, indicates that existing ad bans are unlikely to be enough to stop the next generation of tobacco promotion.
promotion seen earlier this year in Malaysia (see Tobacco Control 2004;13:106–7). Brand promotions have already begun to appear in public places in Turkey, as part of the run-up to the first race, scheduled for 2005. A Benson & Hedges (B&H) car was displayed recently in Metroland, a large shopping mall in Istanbul, proclaimed as part of a world roving activity including Bahrain and Shanghai, two more of the new “Let’s keep tobacco money after all” F1 venues.

The Istanbul display was opened by the mayor of Sisli, the district where Metroland is sited. He already had experience of tobacco promotion, having organised a Spring festival in his municipality with sponsorship from Japan Tobacco (JT), but at least with that one, he sounded contrite when responding to critics, saying he had not known of JT’s involvement because a PR company had done all the work. While presumably he realised that B&H was a cigarette, he may not have thought about the fascination exerted by racing cars on young children. But when he read about the car display in the newspapers, complete with large photographs of the B&H car, he should have spotted the very essence of tobacco companies’ love of F1, a child clearly in thrall to all that power and glamour.

USA: nightingales sing at PM’s AGM

For the first time, nurses from across the USA attended the annual shareholders meeting of Philip Morris in April, in East Hanover, New Jersey, to call on the company to voluntarily end active promotion of cigarettes. Afterwards, members of the Nightingales, a nurses’ advocacy group called after the famous 19th century reforming British nurse Florence Nightingale, held a reading and shared a display of letters from previously secret tobacco industry documents, sent to the company by its dying customers and their families, and what ethical criteria were used in deciding whether to promote deadly tobacco products. Unsurprisingly, Camilleri failed to provide an answer, later repeating the industry mantra about smoking being a choice consumers made with knowledge of the risks involved. Ab Brody, a nurse from San Francisco, speaking to one of the shareholder resolutions, said, “Nobody ever ‘chooses’ to suffocate and die in pain and terror. That wasn’t a choice they made. No; they chose the tobacco industry’s image of cool, fun, glamour. And that’s a big, fat lie.” Then, at the request of Sharon Brown, a nurse from Arizona, shareholders observed 30 seconds of silence in honour of her own father, who would have been celebrating his 74th birthday that day, except that he died from lung cancer from Philip Morris’s products. “I’m here to honour him,” she said, “and to try to keep this company from taking away somebody else’s Dad.” “We’re here to say that this can’t go on,” said Nightingale’s organiser Ruth Malone, associate professor of nursing at the University of California, San Francisco, who first found the letters while doing research on the previously secret tobacco industry documents. “The tobacco industry spends more than $1 million an hour on making their deadly, addictive products look fun, cool, and glamorous—but these letters show the terrifying, painful reality of what cigarettes actually do.”

Florence Nightingale, the 19th century reforming British nurse.

Pakistan: At last, with considerable efforts from Pakistan’s doctor led network of tobacco control advocates, Pakistan is creaking into some sort of action. Latest successes are the decision of the national airline, PIA, to go entirely smoke-free—the policy being introduced to mark World No Tobacco Day; and a new public places campaign by the health ministry.