Turkey: Camel gets through again

In the last issue of Tobacco Control (1997;6:86–7) we reported how RJ Reynolds (RJR) had run a magazine advertisement for Camel Trophy ‘adventure boots’ in contravention of Turkey’s new tobacco advertising ban, which specifically states that it is illegal to advertise not only tobacco products but also any other goods using the name or logo of a tobacco product. Tobacco control advocates were still trying to persuade the government to enforce its law when RJR came out with another well-tried trick: the ‘price’ advertisement. As the figure shows, the company has thoughtfully included the name and logo of the cigarette brand, all of it arranged, as it happens, in the shape of a cigarette pack. Turkish tobacco control advocates are now faced with a new difficulty: trying to persuade their government’s bureaucrats that this amounts to an advertisement. Instead, they might consider asking the bureaucrats to prove that it isn’t. But assuming RJR gets away with this one, too, what will they try next? Watch this space.

India: tobacco toothpaste squeezed out

One of many unusual ways tobacco is used in India is in toothpowder and toothpaste (called ‘creamy snuff’ and sold in toothpaste-type tubes) (figure). There is a widespread misconception in the country that tobacco is good for the teeth—perhaps the ‘buzz’ that users of these products get from nicotine absorbed through the lining of the mouth helps fuel this misconception. This may be a factor, albeit a small one, in India’s position at the top of the world’s oral cancer league.

Now, after a long battle, tobacco toothpowder and toothpaste have been outlawed. The Supreme Court has upheld the total ban originally imposed by the Union government in 1992 on the use of tobacco in toothpowder and toothpaste. It ruled that the government was justified in imposing the total ban in the public interest following opinions expressed by expert bodies, including the World Health Organisation, that the use of tobacco in oral hygiene preparations should be banned because they cause oral cancer. The court dismissed an appeal by an Ayurvedic company from Madhya Pradesh challenging a judgment of the State High Court upholding the ban.

Blaming the children

In Malaysia, the tobacco industry has been funding a government campaign to discourage school students from smoking, and penalties include beating with a cane and expulsion from school. The scheme, launched in May by the education ministry, looks like something that might have been devised by the tobacco companies themselves, and the fact that it is funded by the Confederation of Malaysian Tobacco Manufacturers does nothing to dispel this suspicion. Under the new rules issued by the ministry, a student caught smoking for the first time will be warned and beaten once with a cane. If the offence is repeated, the student will be caned twice and given another warning. A third-time offender will be suspended for up to a maximum of 14 days. Those caught smoking for the fourth time will be expelled.

The vivid and ubiquitous images in Malaysia associating cigarettes with all things exciting and youthful are among the most notorious in the world. It is thus a master stroke of the industry to get the government to punish the children, rather than those who feed them such a plethora of positive associations.

Meanwhile, in neighbouring Singapore, a teenager has been sent to a juvenile home for two years on account of his smoking. A judge rejected an appeal by the 16-year-old boy against the sentence passed last October by a lower court after he was found to possess cigarettes. The boy had been fined on three previous occasions for possessing tobacco, which is an offence in Singapore for those below the age of 18 years. The judge said the boy needed some “shock treatment”, and the spell in the boys’ home would provide the disciplinary action to rehabilitate him.

It seems as improbable that the boy will emerge from custody as a non-smoker as it will be for his counterparts in Malaysia not to catch a strong whiff of the “forbidden fruit.”
Smoke-free summits

To mark World No-Tobacco Day (31 May), health advocates in the Czech Republic organised a national "Non-tobacco Climb" of Snežka, the country's highest summit, in the Giant mountains. Representatives of many institutions took part in the climb, including a member of parliament, the president of the Czech Olympic committee, representatives of the Youth of the Czech Red Cross, the League against Cancer, Czech EMASH (European Medical Association on Smoking and Health), the National Institute of Public Health, and the regional Public Health Service. Thirteen of the 21 participants reached the top (1602 m) at noon on Saturday, 31 May. The weather conditions were hard—snow, with a wind speed of 18 m/s, foggy, a temperature of −3°C, and nearly 50 cm of fresh snow to walk through. But, as Hana Sovinova of the National Institute of Public Health put it, "We all were very happy that we have—united—fulfilled our idea: to support a no tobacco world."

The Czech event was inspired by the First Non-tobacco Climb of Mount Aconcagua, Argentina, which was initiated by Raoul Uranga, who is the United Nations (UN) Focal Point on Tobacco or Health, in January. A summary of this remarkable initiative follows.

The Aconcagua climb involved 28 people, from Argentina, Europe, and North America. At 6960 m, Aconcagua is the highest mountain in the Americas and the highest mountain in the world outside Asia. Mr Uranga, who had climbed it 15 years before, chose it partly because it offers climbers several paths to the top, including one which does not present any technical difficulty, and it is significant that several people with no previous experience of mountain climbing eventually reached the summit. January is not only the warmest month in the southern hemisphere, but this year it also coincided with the 100th anniversary of the first successful climb of Aconcagua by Swiss climber Theo Zurbriggen.

Considerable effort was given to planning, with support being obtained from a wide variety of officials. Climbers were organised in three groups of six to 12 participants, which were further subdivided into units of two to three, the size of a tent, which were fully autonomous in terms of equipment, food, and fuel. At the end of December all participants met at the hostel of Puente del Inca at 2800 m, loaded mules with all the equipment required for the planned two-week stay on the mountain, and celebrated the New Year toasting the expedition's success.

After setting out on 1 January, a 40-kilometre trek took the climbers to base camp, at 4300 m. At this altitude, the air contains only 50% of the oxygen at sea level, so two days were spent acclimatising before starting on the long and tiring transportation of loads to higher camps, going by the names of Plaza Canada (4800 m), Cambio de Penedente (5100 m), Nido de Condores (5400 m), and Berlin (5900 m), from where the final attack on the summit is normally launched (figure). This hard effort took its toll, as several participants started showing signs of fatigue, superficial oedema (a high-altitude water-retention phenomenon affecting the extremities), signs of pulmonary oedema, serious headaches, and nausea. These are all typical signs of high-altitude sickness, which was controlled by encouraging participants to either go down to recover before trying again, or simply to give up and go back down to the town of Mendoza.

Finally, on 10 January all remaining participants met at the Berlin camp to spend a bad night with very strong winds at almost 6000 m. The next day, participants got up at 4 am to have a quick breakfast and melt ice to fill three vacuum flasks each, the minimum needed to reach the summit in the extremely dry conditions found on Aconcagua. By 1 pm, the climbers arrived at the summit; including two other participants who had gone ahead some days earlier, they brought to 10 the number who had ensured the success of the first international mountain climb against smoking.

Mr Uranga is currently considering organising another expedition to Aconcagua in January of 1998, and one—probably in December 1997—to Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa, and which, like Aconcagua, does not pose major technical difficulties. Anyone interested in participating is welcome to write to Raoul Uranga, UN Focal Point on Tobacco or Health, fax +42 22 907 0047; email: raul.uranga@unctad.org

South Africa: media collusion with tobacco

The Newspaper Press Union (NPU) was mentioned in two separate news items in Business Day, the leading business daily in South Africa, in June. The first reported that a submission to the Truth Commission—which is investigating human rights abuses under apartheid—by the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) stated that the NPU had "colluded" with the previous government in limiting press freedom. The second item noted that the NPU supported a newly formed body, the Freedom of Commercial Speech Trust, which opposed any limits on advertising of products such as cigarettes.

Reading the two items, I was struck by the startling similarity between the media owners' conduct under the old, apartheid regime, and its present attitude to tobacco. In both instances, they appear to be motivated more by "financial interests" than the "ethics of professional journalism."

The FXI study reportedly states that a "principled or crusading stance against apartheid was regarded as bad for business" by media owners, and that editors practiced "self-censorship" in reporting matters deemed sensitive by the state.