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Malaysia becomes 63rd country to ratify FCTC

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MALAYSIA on Tuesday signed a historic document that will put it on the way to curbing smoking which, according to the Health Ministry's statistics, have resulted in more than 10,000 tobacco-related illnesses annually.

Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng ratified the Framework for Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) at the United Nations headquarters here.

The ratification would, among others, require Malaysia to undertake several commitments including curbing tobacco-related advertising, either direct or indirect, as well as raising the price of cigarettes and other tobacco-related products.

"It is a happy day and a victory for health, and a blow to the tobacco industry," he said after the simple ceremony which saw Malaysia becoming the 63rd country to ratify the FCTC.

In meeting the provisions of FCTC, Malaysia will in effect create an environment that will not be conducive to smokers.

"(The ratification) will send a clear message to Malaysians that smoking is hazardous to health," Chua said.

Currently, the statistics do not look good. Over the last two decades smoking has been blamed for about 10 per cent of domestic deaths annually. The habit is also getting popular with the young, with about 20 per cent having picked it up.

On the FCTC, Chua said for the first time the world was sending a message to the tobacco industry that "you are directly responsible for health and you will be held directly accountable for all ill-effects on health."

With the move, the Health Ministry would undertake serious enforcement, with the hope that tobacco-related deaths could be substantially reduced in a few decades.

This global effort to curb smoking-related illnesses, which are said to number five million annually, was formalised following the agreement at last year's World Health Organisation meeting that saw 191 United Nations member countries supporting it.

The convention requires at least 40 countries to ratify it before it comes into effect.

Chua said for the past two years, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has convinced the Cabinet to approve some of the most significant initiatives against smoking, and that the ratification of the FCTC placed great responsibility on the tobacco industry.

He said the Cabinet was also going through the final stages of the Tobacco Control Act, which would curb tobacco advertisements, either directly or indirectly.

However, a grace period until 2006 is given for Formula 1 racing, and a couple of other sports, like sepak takraw.

Among the provisions of FCTC are matters relating to the taxation of tobacco-related products, price control, curbing demands, protection against secondary smoking, as well as the reduction in smuggling.