

World Health Organization Backs Uruguay in Legal Battle with Tobacco Company



Montevideo, November 7 (RHC-EFE) -- The World Health Organization has expressed support for the Uruguayan government in its ongoing legal dispute with U.S.-based tobacco giant Philip Morris International, an aide to President Jose Mujica told reporters.

Diego Canepa, who said the government discussed the matter at a Cabinet meeting on Thursday, pointed to recent statements by Carissa Etienne -- director of the Pan American Health Organization, the regional office of the WHO -- expressing support for Uruguay's position.

The South American nation's efforts to implement policies aimed at protecting its population from tobacco consumption and secondhand smoke, despite Philip Morris' legal challenges, "demonstrate that the country will not be intimidated by the industry," Etienne was quoted as saying in a PAHO/WHO release on Wednesday.

In 2010, Philip Morris brought a claim against Uruguay at ICSID alleging that public health regulations implemented during the 2005-2010 administration of Mujica's predecessor, Tabaré Vázquez, violated the company's trade rights established under an investment agreement between Uruguay and Switzerland,

where the tobacco giant's operation center is located.

Vázquez, an oncologist by profession, launched a crusade against tobacco consumption during his administration that included measures requiring cigarettes packages to feature health warnings on 80 percent of their main surface and prohibiting them from containing the words "light" or "mild."

Additional regulations barred smoking at offices, bars, restaurants and other enclosed public spaces.

Cigarette companies were hard hit by the measures, with tobacco consumption declining by 23 percent between 2005 and 2011, according to a private study cited by PAHO/WHO.

Direct consumption of tobacco and exposure to secondhand smoke kill some 6 million people worldwide - including 1 million people in the Americas - each year, according to WHO figures.

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