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## FOR YOUR INFORMATION

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# Merchants of Death

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Curt Dewees

Three million people around the world will die this year from tobacco-related illnesses. If current trends continue, the worldwide death rate from tobacco will rise to 10 million a year by the year 2020. To put it simply, tobacco will eventually kill half a billion of the people alive on earth today, says Richard Peto, an epidemiologist from the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

Although cigarette sales are decreasing in the United States by 1.1 percent a year, they are increasing in developing countries by 2.1 percent a year.<sup>2</sup>

Why is worldwide smoking on the increase? One reason is that the United States is actively pushing its tobacco products into other countries. As U.S. smoking rates decline, American tobacco companies look overseas to develop new markets. Like the pirates of old who roamed the seas preying on the weak and unprotected, today's tobacco companies now plunder the vulnerable populations of developing countries. They are the modern-day merchants of death.

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### The Untapped Market

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"Essentially, they [the American tobacco companies] were looking at populations that were not smokers—had never been smokers—in countries that had their own monopoly on tobacco, and identifying these populations as a huge, untapped market for American tobacco or multinational tobacco companies," said William Tipping, chief executive officer of the American Cancer Society.

Tipping says the tobacco com-

panies have targeted "women and young children in Third World Countries—basically countries in the Pacific Rim—who had never had a history of smoking."<sup>3</sup>

Evidence from the tobacco industry journals support these accusations. As a writer in *Tobacco Reporter* observed, "The Asian market—the lucrative and elusive Asian market. There are not many places left in the world that make U.S. cigarette manufacturers wring their hands in anticipation and pat their wallets in hope."<sup>4</sup>

The U.S. government supports the use of developing countries as a dumping ground for U.S.-made cigarettes. There are two reasons for this policy. First, the tobacco companies are rich, powerful, and influential with the U.S. government. Second, and perhaps more important, the United States currently has a large trade deficit, since it imports much more than it exports. Because this trade imbalance is not good for the American economy, the government is looking for ways to increase U.S. exports. Thus tobacco is still considered one of America's most valuable cash crops.

In recent years the U.S. government has pressured the governments of South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan to open their doors to U.S. tobacco companies. In Eastern Europe American tobacco entrepreneurs are conquering new territory, especially in what used to be East Germany. As soon as the dust from the fallen Berlin Wall had settled, U.S. tobacco companies crossed over and bought up the factories and brand names of

the former East German cigarette monopoly. As a result of this "global strategy" U.S. tobacco exports are booming. They reached \$5 billion in 1989 and are growing by 25 percent a year.<sup>5</sup>

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### Fighting Back

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The rising flood of U.S. tobacco exports has raised a public outcry by many groups interested in health. In April 1990, some 1,000 delegates from 70 countries gathered in Perth, Australia, for the Seventh World Congress on Tobacco and Health. The conference theme: World Tobacco Control.

A book released in conjunction with the conference summed up the tobacco problem as "a tragedy totally man-made which can be totally unmade if there is the political will. The scandal is how little is being done by those in authority and the continuing unconscionable activities of the tobacco corporations."<sup>6</sup>

"It is unconscionable to have the tobacco companies peddling their wares abroad. We don't let them use this media [radio, television, movies] at home, yet they force it in developing countries," said conference attendee James O. Mason, assistant secretary for Health and Human Services in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

At its 55th General Conference Session in 1990, the Seventh-day Adventist Church issued a statement that publicly condemned U.S. tobacco companies for their worldwide tobacco marketing strategies. Through the efforts of the International Commission for the Prevention of Alcoholism and Drug Dependency (ICPA), based at the Adventist World Head-

quarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A., the church continues to maintain a public presence in the war on tobacco.

In the fall of 1990, the ICPA joined a nation-wide protest against the "Bill of Rights" tour sponsored by Philip Morris Co., Inc., the largest American cigarette manufacturer. Thomas Neslund, executive director of the ICPA, issued a public statement claiming the Philip Morris has pumped \$60 million into its "Bill of Rights" tour, using a smoke screen of patriotism, deceptive slogans, and advertising tricks-of-the-trade to continue to sell its tobacco products and recruit new smokers, mainly children.<sup>8</sup>

Although they are outfinanced by the giant tobacco firms, there is evidence that strong pressure from public-health groups can have an impact. For example, the U.S. government recently ceased its pressure on Thailand to loosen restrictions on tobacco advertising and other market constraints on tobacco. This decision came after a firestorm of protest against America's strong-arm tactics.

It was decided that Thailand cannot ban cigarette imports since it produces and sells tobacco to its own people. However, Thailand will be allowed to ban advertising, levy taxes, and control cigarette distribution to discourage smoking and protect its citizens from the health threats of smoking. This is considered a victory by health groups. They feared that trade pressures would force Thailand to let U.S. companies launch cigarette advertising campaigns in that country as they have done in so many others.<sup>9</sup>

Not all of the world's tobacco problems can be blamed on the United States. Many countries around the world grow tobacco for their own con-

sumption and for export. It is estimated that nearly three-fourths of the world's tobacco crop is grown in developing countries. Clearly, any strategy for achieving tobacco control must include changing the perceptions and practices of governments, farmers, and consumers within each country, as well as fighting the rising tide of imported tobacco.

### What You Can Do

You can join in the battle for worldwide tobacco control.

1. Get involved in stop-smoking programs sponsored by your local church, hospital, or clinic.

2. Write letters to government representatives to demand stricter controls on tobacco sales and marketing, and to implement policies designed to encourage farmers to raise crops other than tobacco.

3. Write letters to newspaper editors and other media outlets to educate the public about the tobacco problem.



Lady Nicotine

4. Participate in health-education campaigns to teach children and youth about the dangers of smoking before they get hooked.

5. Contact public health organizations to find out how you can help them fight the tobacco invasion. An organization sponsored by Seventh-day-Adventist Church is the International Commission for the Prevent of Alcoholism and Drug Dependency (ICPA). Write to: Thomas Neslund, Executive Director, ICPA, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600, U.S.A.

Defeating the modern-day merchants of death will not be easy, but compassion for our brothers and sisters around the world compels us to keep on fighting.

### NOTES

1. Quoted in H. Stanton, "Time to Clear the Air," *South Pacific Division Record*, May 12, 1990, p. 7.

2. S. A. Farag, "The Tobacco Industry's Global Strategy," *Adventist Review*, June 28, 1990, p. 10 (658).

3. "NPT Interview: William Tipping," *The NonProfit Times*, February 1991, p. 10.

4. *Tobacco Reporter*, 1987.

5. J. Burgess, "Exports Fire Up for Tobacco Industries," *The Washington Post*, December 16, 1990, p. H1.

6. S. Chapman, and W. Leng, *Tobacco Control in the Third World* (Penang, Malaysia: International Organizations of Consumer's Unions, 1990), p. ii.

7. Quoted by H. Stanton.

8. A. Samuels, "Protesters Jeer Sponsor of Exhibit," *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, December 11, 1990, p. D1.

9. D. McLellan, "U.S. Stops Its Move to Pressure Thailand on Tobacco Marketing," *The Nation's Health*, January 1991.

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