

Bhutan set to legalise tobacco products to control Covid-19 spread



The Tobacco Control (Amendment) Bill 2021 will enable the selling, distributing, buying, possessing, and transporting of tobacco or tobacco products in the country legally.

By Sangay Rabten | June 26, 2021

THIMPU: The National Assembly on Friday passed the Tobacco Control (Amendment) Bill 2021 and Tax Bill of Bhutan 2021, in a first step towards lifting the ban and legalising selling, buying, possession, distribution, and transportation of tobacco and tobacco products in the country.

In adopting the Tobacco Control (Amendment) Bill of Bhutan 2021 with 35 sitting members, 33 supported the Bill and 1 voted 'No'. One member abstained from the vote.

The Bill was adopted with the vote of majority to lift the ban on selling, buying and possessing, as well as distributing transporting tobacco and tobacco products in Bhutan. Legalising tobacco comes with the aim of putting a check on spread of COVID-19, threatened by the continuous smuggling of tobacco products through Bhutan's porous southern border.

The lift of ban on tobacco products, however, does not include production and manufacturing of the same in Bhutan.

Chairperson of the Legislative Committee, Bongo-Chapcha MP Tshewang Lhamo, presented the Committee's recommendation on the Tobacco Control (Amendment) Bill 2021 on Thursday. The committee proposed amendments to the Bill along with 19 recommendations.

Lhamo said that though 'Section 11 B' was not altered, the clauses that prohibit the sale of tobacco products have been repealed. The sections on fines and penalties, possession and transportation of tobacco and tobacco products have been removed and the limit on permissible quantities for import of such products has also been repealed.

Before the relevant section was repealed, an individual was allowed to import only 800 sticks of cigarettes or 1,200 sticks of bidis or 150 pieces of cigars or 750 grams of other tobacco or tobacco products into Bhutan.

If the Bill is endorsed, the government has assured to take measures to prevent people from using the tobacco products.

Foreign minister Dr Tandi Dorji said the government will create awareness and asked the health ministry to develop a programme to help people cut down on their tobacco consumption.

Like alcohol, the Dorji said, “Tobacco products to anyone below the age of 18 will not be sold, as it is clearly reflected in the Bhutan Narcotics Control Authority’s Rules and Regulations.”

On the same day, the Tax Bill of Bhutan 2021 was also adopted, where the House voted 33 ‘Yes’, one ‘No’ and 2 ‘Abstain’ from the 36 sitting members. The member in-charge of the Bill, Finance Minister Namgay Tshering, moved the motion to adopt the Bill.

The House unanimously agreed to do away with Sales Tax on tobacco and tobacco products. The government introduced the Tax Bill of Bhutan 2021 for tax revision as an interim measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19, upon finding that COVID-19 protocols are breached along the southern border with rampant smuggling and black marketing of tobacco and tobacco products.

The Finance Minister said that tobacco products brought via air are for self-consumption and there is no point in changing custom duty, as it has never affected the country.

He added: “Tobacco products used in the country are smuggled from India. Doing away with custom duty on tobacco products will only encourage people to use more.”

At present, 100 per cent Sales Tax is levied on an individual importing tobacco from India. And an additional 100 per cent customs tax is imposed if a person brings in tobacco and tobacco products from third countries.

While a few members of the parliament recommended doing away with customs duty along with the sales tax, the foreign minister said lifting of the ban does not mean that tobacco products will be available everywhere.

“Shops in the vicinity of institutions like schools and lhakhangs would not be allowed to sell tobacco,” the minister said.

The Bills will now be referred to the National Council (Upper House) for endorsement.

The Tobacco Control Act of Bhutan was enacted and implemented by the Parliament of Bhutan in June 2010. It regulates tobacco and tobacco products, banning the cultivation, harvesting, production, and sale of tobacco and tobacco products in Bhutan.

The Act also mandates that the Government of Bhutan provide counselling and treatment to facilitate tobacco cessation. Premised on the physical health and well-being of the Bhutanese people – important elements of Gross National Happiness – the Tobacco Control Act recognises the harmful effects of tobacco consumption and exposure to tobacco smoke on both spiritual and social health.

Source: <https://www.eastmojo.com/neighbourhood-watch/bhutan/2021/06/26/bhutan-set-to-legalise-tobacco-products-to-control-covid-19-spread/>