

## **Herat Tries to Quit Smoking**

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Western province becomes first to impose ban on smoking in government offices, but so far officials failing to enforce the law.

The western province of Herat has become the first in Afghanistan to impose a ban on smoking.

The regulation, introduced in late April, currently affects only government offices but officials say they want to extend it to restaurants, hotels and other public places.

The health department promulgated the ban primarily to protect employees from passive smoking, said Raufa Niazi, the provincial public health director.

"It's both dangerous to health and it causes environmental contamination," she said. "We do have a board of control from the public health department that's checking from time to time to make sure nobody is smoking."

The new law provides for no penalties, however, and an IWPR reporter who recently visited government offices - even the health department itself - found plenty of evidence that people were still lighting up at work.

"My habit in the past was not to smoke inside the office," said Noor Mohammad Ghoryani, gesturing toward a full ashtray near his desk in the public health department building. "But my colleagues do smoke a lot inside the office. It's better if they smoke outside."

Deputy governor Mir Abdul Khaliq said he supported the ban, but admitted being among those who ignored it.

"If someone claims that someone else is smoking in his office, at the moment we don't have any punishment," said Abdullah Fahim, an advisor to the health department.

But he noted that Afghanistan had signed up to a resolution enacted last year by the World Health Organisation that smoking on public property should be banned. He predicted that the national legislature which is to be elected in September would extend the regulation nationwide.

Niazi said authorities in Herat, which borders Iran in Afghanistan's far west, also intend to outlaw the widespread practice of hookah smoking.

Many restaurants offer water pipes to customers, who recline on carpets and cushions to smoke dried apples, tangerines and other fruit. The pipes, with a single mouthpiece that smokers pass around, are called chilam-e-miwayee, or fruit hookahs.

"Our next step is a ban on the chilam-e-miwayee," said Raufa. "They can transmit germs, and smoking in groups can cause several types of contagious disease."

Many local people and shopkeepers said they welcomed the move, but a good number also doubted whether the ban could be enforced. The most common brands of cigarette cost only 20 cents US a pack.

Mohammad Arif, 20, says he makes a profit of about four dollars a day selling cigarettes in his shop, but said he would gladly forego the profit in the interests of people's health.

Abdul Samim, owner of the popular Arghawan restaurant, said he would welcome a ban on hookahs even though he would lose business. The employees who prepare them complain of headaches, he said.

Fahim, the health department advisor, said the new parliament should not only ban smoking on public property but should hike the tax on cigarettes, all of which are imported. The tax revenue should be used to treat diseases caused by smoking, he said.

Wahidullah Amani is a staff reporter for IWPR in Herat.

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