



STOPPING TOBACCO
ORGANIZATIONS & PRODUCTS

COVID-19
Monitoring
Brief



Global



STOP COVID-19 Monitoring Brief: The tobacco industry, its interests and allies

Edition 5: Covering the period
May 30 - June 12, 2020

June 18, 2020,

This update from [STOP, a global tobacco industry watchdog](#), is not intended as a comprehensive list of all TI responses, but as a chance to share the trends and emerging patterns observed from multiple sources. We invite readers to [share information](#) or leads about additional examples or new trends. Next issue: July 2nd, 2020.

Major Trends in the Fourth Monitoring Period

- Industry response to accusations it is taking advantage of the pandemic (CSR)
- Industry concerns about pandemic related financial losses
- The court case against the South African tobacco ban began on June 9
- Media reporting on “smokers protected from coronavirus”

On June 8 2020, STOP released this statement on industry accountability: [As Costs Pile Up for COVID-19, Tobacco Companies Should Be Held Accountable for Smoking-Related Health Harms](#); a sentiment reflected in this CNN opinion piece by Bloomberg Philanthropies Director of Public Health, Dr Kelly Henning: [The fight against Covid-19 should also be the fight against tobacco.](#)

Corporate social responsibility (CSR)

- Following accusations of exploiting the pandemic through CSR donations, both PMI and Imperial Tobacco have responded by saying they were asked to donate ventilators in Greece and Ukraine,¹ that such donations are not a breach of the WHO FCTC (article 5.3 of the FCTC specifically addresses industry social responsibility²) and that they are not promoting donations to the public, despite evidence to the contrary.^{3 4}
- In India, Bangalore public officials publicly thanked Indian Tobacco Company Limited (ITC) for their lockdown deliveries of ITC food products.⁵
- South Korean tobacco company KT&G have donated a total of 7,600 COVID-19 diagnostic kits to Russia and Turkey.⁶
- **Industry Vaccine development:** Biotech company Medicago, who

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are 40% PMI owned, announced positive results from animal trials of their COVID-19 vaccine. BAT's Kentucky BioProcessing is looking to governments for support in terms of drug approval and manufacture for their vaccine development programme.^{7 8}

Additional Resources

GGTC regularly updates this thorough [list](#) of country specific tobacco industry donations during COVID-19, compared with the economic costs of tobacco.

Tobacco Industry Business During Pandemic

- BAT has warned of a combined 7% drop in sales volume of cigarette and heated tobacco products in response to COVID-19. The company highlighted strict lockdown measures in Mexico, Argentina and South Africa as being particularly damaging to business alongside reduced sales in airports.⁹
- Industry profits in emerging cigarette markets have been particularly affected by the pandemic, such as in Bangladesh and Vietnam.¹⁰ These findings mirror fears about declines in sales including duty free sales reported by PMI at its AGM¹¹ and predictions made about the potential impact of the pandemic on PMI/the tobacco industry.¹²

Policy Interference and Legal Action

[South Africa](#) tobacco ban:

The court case challenging the controversial tobacco ban brought by the Fair-Trade Independent Tobacco Association (FITA) against the government began on 9th June in Pretoria. Minister of Co-operative Governance & Traditional Affairs, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, said the ban was imposed to “protect human life and health and to reduce the potential strain on the health care system” and was informed by evidence indicating worse outcomes for smokers with COVID-19.¹³

- FITA have accused the government of failing to consider the implications of such a ban¹⁴ and alongside pro-vape groups, claimed that the ban has bolstered the

illicit cigarette trade in South Africa.¹⁵ Exaggeration of illicit trade numbers is a familiar industry tactic,¹⁶ however there has been independent reporting of some increased illicit trade in response to the ban.¹⁷

- FITA said in court that the WHO states there is no peer reviewed data to indicate increased hospitalization or increased disease severity in smokers.¹⁸ In fact, the WHO report says “the available evidence suggests that smoking **is** associated with **increased severity of disease** and death in hospitalized COVID-19 patients. Although likely related to severity, **no evidence to quantify the risk to smokers of hospitalization with COVID-19** or of infection by SARS-CoV-2 was found in the peer-reviewed literature. Population-based studies are needed to address these questions.”¹⁹
- At time of writing, judgement on the case has been reserved.
- There have been protests at the gates of parliament by those angry with the ban.²⁰

Additional Resources

GGTC's list of bans and contemplated bans per country: [Bans/ Contemplated Bans on Tobacco/Vaping Products](#)

TobaccoTactics.com – [Industry lobbying](#)

Academic Research of Industry Interest

- A paper has been published on Mexican data indicating underrepresentation of current smokers amongst those hospitalised with COVID-19 and suggesting nicotine as a therapeutic.²¹ The authors include Konstantinos Poulas, who has received funding from PMI's [Foundation for a Smoke-Free World](#) via the Nosmoke Insititute.²² This has again been reported in the Daily Mail (UK)²³ and elsewhere²⁴ as more evidence that smoking protects against COVID-19, with very little attention paid to the biological plausibility of this evidence, concerns raised about any potential significant biases in such studies and the increased chance of disease severity and death in smokers.²⁵
- However, the Daily Mail²⁶ also separately reported on an Imperial College London study that “supports the hypothesis that **smokers are more likely to develop symptoms** consistent with COVID-19 and that they have

an increased symptom burden.” This study overcame issues of inaccurate reporting of smoking status in hospital by using the data of 2.4 million people from a symptom tracking app.²⁷

- FSFW funded [Riccardo Polosa](#) has published further on the Nicotinic Hypothesis, which suggests nicotine as having a therapeutic role in COVID-19.²⁸ As it stands there is still no direct data supporting the hypothesis and much disagreement over the role of ACE2, nicotine and smoking.²⁹
- The FSFW has been offering funding to research collaborators for work investigating smoking, nicotine and COVID-19.³⁰

Additional Resources

[STOP COVID-19 Action Center](#)

[COVID-19 Breakthroughs: Separating Fact From Fiction](#)

Future briefings

We welcome any contributions on issues mentioned in this update or anything related to COVID-19 and the Tobacco Industry. Contact us at bath@exposetobacco.org. The next update will be on July 02, 2020.

Visit the [Tobacco Tactics COVID-19](#) page for further information.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.euronews.com/2020/06/08/tobacco-giants-fume-over-claims-they-exploited-covid-19-with-romania-greece-ukraine-donati>
- 2 <https://tobaccotactics.org/wiki/framework-convention-on-tobacco-control/>
- 3 <https://www.occrp.org/en/loosetobacco/blowing-unsmoke/pandering-to-pandemic>
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- 9 <https://www.standard.co.uk/business/british-american-tobacco-warns-of-covid-sales-hit-as-lockdowns-hit-a4463366.html>
- 10 <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-06-10/coronavirus-big-tobacco-wasn-t-so-defensive-after-all>
- 11 <https://exposetobacco.org/resources/pmi-claims-on-covid-19/>
- 12 <https://exposetobacco.org/news/pmi-aqm/>
- 13 <https://businesstech.co.za/news/business/406047/what-to-expect-from-south-africas-cigarette-sale-court-battle-happening-this-week/>
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- 15 <https://www.vapingpost.com/2020/06/09/south-africas-covid-19-tobacco-ban-has-backfired-as-predicted/>
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- 17 <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2020/06/09/south-africa-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-cigarette-ban-smuggling-mckenzie-pkg-intl-ldn-vpx.cnn/video/playlists/coronavirus-intl/>
- 18 <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-06-10-judgment-reserved-the-battle-of-wills-in-court-over-tobacco-ban/>
- 19 <https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/smoking-and-covid-19>
- 20 <https://ewn.co.za/2020/06/13/ct-smokers-reiterate-call-for-govt-to-lift-ban-on-tobacco-products>
- 21 <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.06.04.20122481v2>
- 22 <https://tobaccotactics.org/wiki/nosmoke-institute/>
- 23 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8306781/Researchers-uncover-evidence-smokers-protected-deadly-coronavirus.html>
- 24 <https://www.jpost.com/health-science/more-studies-point-to-nicotine-as-a-potential-therapeutic-for-covid-19-630576>
- 25 <https://exposetobacco.org/resources/review-two-french-studies/>
- 26 " <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8344923/Smoking-DOES-increase-risk-catching-coronavirus-study-2-4million-British-people-finds.html>
- 27 <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.05.18.20105288v1.full.pdf>
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