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UN summit urges more accountability within food and beverage industry

The international food and beverage industry must be held accountable for putting profit over public health in the battle against noncommunicable diseases, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon says.

Calling for targets to be set by 2012 to curb mortality from chronic diseases, Ki-moon told delegates to the opening session of the UN Summit on noncommunicable diseases in New York City, New York that there is a need for more responsible marketing of processed food to children and that trade in tobacco, alcohol and processed foods laden with fat, sugar and salt will have to be reformed.

“There is a well-documented and shameful history of certain players in industry who ignored the science — sometimes even their own research — and put public health at risk to protect their own profits,” Ki-moon said. “We must hold everyone accountable.”

Urging “corporations that profit from selling processed foods to act with the utmost integrity,” Ki-moon said worldwide deaths from noncommunicable diseases are expected to increase by 17% over the next decade and by 24% in Africa.

“The prognosis is grim,” Ki-moon said, adding that global obesity levels have doubled since 1980. “This is a slow-motion disaster [that is] spreading with stunning speed and sweep.” Statistics have long indicated that the incidence of noncommunicable diseases in poor countries is now disproportionately higher than in the developed world as a result of a global shift toward the consumption of processed foods rich in salt, sugars and trans fats.

The 193-member UN General Assembly adopted a consensus declaration on Monday calling on the World Health Organization to develop a set of global targets before the end of 2012 to monitor trends and progress in the battle to reduce death and disability from noncommunicable diseases (www.un.org/en/ga/ncdmeeting2011/pdf/NCD_draft_political_declaration.pdf). The declaration commits governments to strengthen their national health systems and policies to make more of an effort to prevent and treat noncommunicable diseases and to integrate policies aimed reducing the impact of the diseases more directly into national health and economic development plans.

Yet, not all leaders appeared convinced that the declaration is an adequate response to the threat.

Heads of state and ministers from numerous developing nations in the Caribbean, Africa and Asia called for faster, tougher action, especially against the international processed food industry. “We need global standards for trans fat, salt and sugar,” said Guyana’s Minister of Health, Dr. Leslie Ramsammy. “Those of us working in public health are no match for the marketing programs of large multinational companies. This is not the time to be timid.”

Other leaders, including Malaysia's Health Minister Liow Tong Lai, said that national efforts to regulate food producers will require protection from international trade law, much in the manner that the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control was established to protect domestic tobacco laws from international trade challenges.

"We call on the international community to put pressure on the food industry," South Africa's health minister, Dr. Aaron Motsoaledi said after describing his country's efforts to pass laws to reduce salt content in processed foods.

Botswana's Health Minister Dr. John Seakgosing lamented the lack of teeth in the UN's proposed plan. "Where are the targets?" he asked. "What should we strive for?"

Reaction from the leaders of the rich countries that are home to the world's major processed food corporations was largely mute on the topic of regulating salt, sugar and fat contents in processed foods.

Canadian health minister Leona Aglukkaq elided the food contents issue – the Canadian government has not even acted on domestic salt regulations despite widespread calls from health experts – while emphasizing that "prevention must be the basis of our actions."

Meanwhile, United Kingdom Health Minister Andrew Lansley sharply refuted calls for domestic and international regulation of the processed food industry. "The Elimination of Obesity Act, 2011, does not and will not exist," he quipped.

Industry representatives urged a voluntary, rather than a regulatory approach. A spokesperson for the International Food and Beverage Association, which represents companies with combined sales topping US\$350-billion annually, told a special UN-organize roundtable that its member companies have voluntarily reformulated over 20 000 products to reduce trans fat, salt and sugar while restricting advertising to children.

But voluntary approaches have not proven effective, Patti Rundall, policy director for the nonprofit organization Baby Milk Action and a member of the European Union Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, which was established with food industry participation in 2005 to determine if self-monitored voluntary commitments could be effective in curbing the rise in obesity and food-related illnesses.

After six years, "there is no tangible impact on obesity levels and no evidence that voluntary commitments are more effective than regulation," Rundall says.

Without tough new regulations, activists say that the toll taken by noncommunicable diseases will only rise if intervention efforts remain static, activists say. The WHO says that cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and chronic pulmonary disease will take 36 million lives a year, and result in a US\$7-trillion cumulative economic losses to low- and middle-income countries over the period 2011–2025 (www.who.int/nmh/publications/best_buys_summary.pdf). — Paul Christopher Webster, New York City, NY

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