



STOPPING TOBACCO  
ORGANIZATIONS & PRODUCTS

COVID-19  
Monitoring  
Brief



Global



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

**Edition 3:** Covering the period  
May 1 – May 15, 2020

May 21, 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: June 4, 2020.

## Major Trends in the third Monitoring Period

- Tobacco workers at risk of COVID-19 and industry pressure to manufacture: Focus on Indonesia and Argentina
- Tobacco bans and the developing situation in South Africa.
- Surveying smoking habits during COVID-19: Industry response to research and attempts to align with public health.
- Industry social media marketing exploiting COVID-19

The WHO released a [statement](#) on May 11, 2020 saying that smoking is a risk factor for COVID-19, urging smokers to quit and warning people away from “unproven interventions”.

## Corporate social responsibility (CSR)

- **Corporate COVID-19 response:** BAT highlighted its CSR and COVID-19 work plan in an open [letter](#) to the public from Chief Executive Jack Bowles. PMI and Altria both highlighted their COVID-19 CSR and general organisational plans in Annual General Meetings.<sup>1 2</sup> See STOP’s analysis of the PMI AGM slides [here](#), including PMI’s reported >\$30 million CSR donations.
- In Costa Rica, PMI donated 40,000 N95 face masks to the government.<sup>3</sup>
- South Korean tobacco company and PMI partner KT&G donated \$82,000 worth of COVID-19 test kits to Indonesia.<sup>4</sup>
- Altria donated \$90,000 to COVID-19 relief efforts in Kentucky, USA.<sup>5</sup>
- JTI donated over \$150,000 and PMI over \$650,000 to Turkish COVID-19 relief funds.<sup>6</sup>
- **Vaccine development:** BAT’s Kentucky BioProcessing say it is ready for human trials of its COVID-19 vaccine.<sup>7</sup>

## 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 Workers and Manufacture During Pandemic

Increased pressure and interference from the tobacco industry to reopen factories, or to persist with production against the advice of health authorities, has increasingly placed their staff at risk. This has resulted in quarantines, positive COVID-19 tests and deaths.

- **Argentina:** Massalin Particulares, a subsidiary of PMI in Argentina, published a letter in local newspapers calling for their factories to reopen.<sup>8</sup> The PMI annual shareholders meeting on May 6<sup>th</sup> mentioned Argentina, warning of increased risk of illicit trade due to a national shortage of tobacco stocks.<sup>9</sup> Restrictions were lifted on May 10 and the company claimed it could restock the nation within one week.<sup>10</sup>
  - BAT is yet to restart tobacco production in Argentina due to provincial restrictions.<sup>11</sup>
- **Indonesian Workers:** 500 staff from PMI's Sampoerna factory were placed under quarantine following the deaths of two tobacco workers and the positive testing of a further 63.<sup>12</sup> Health authorities have recalled cigarettes produced in the factory.<sup>13</sup>
- **Pakistan:** Continued production at the Pakistan Tobacco Company factory (a subsidiary of BAT) has resulted in 89 positive COVID-19 cases.<sup>14</sup>

## Policy Interference and Tobacco Regulation

- **South Africa tobacco ban:** Following BAT's cessation of legal action, The Fair Trade Independent Tobacco Association (FITA) has paused court proceedings against the South African government, thanks to government "concessions" after concerns over the [illicit trade](#) argument.<sup>15 16</sup>
  - The industry has used academic research in South Africa to legitimise front organisations like PMI's [Foundation for a Smoke-Free World](#). The University of Cape Town published a study which found that 16% of respondents had successfully quit smoking during lockdown and that 90% had managed to purchase cigarettes despite the ban.<sup>17</sup> FSFW President Dereck Yach referenced the study to say that bans on cigarettes fail.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, a study by the Human Sciences Research Council in

South Africa(HSRC) found that 88% of respondents were unable to obtain cigarettes and had reduced consumption.<sup>19</sup>

- Japan Tobacco International has joined other industry members in urging the government to reconsider its tobacco ban.<sup>20</sup>

## Additional resources

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

## Academic Research of Industry Interest

- Stories about the 'protective effect' of smoking against COVID-19 have been reported in the UK tabloid media<sup>21</sup> and repeated by industry friendly commentators such as [Christopher Snowden](#)<sup>22</sup>. Recent high-quality studies show increased COVID-19 severity<sup>23</sup> and mortality<sup>24</sup> in smokers.
- PMI's front group, the [Foundation for a Smoke-Free World](#) (FSFW) published its "[State of Smoking Poll](#)", The study reported increased quit attempts, but no reductions in tobacco product consumption in the USA, Italy, UK, South Africa and India and an increase in purchasing cut. The latter part of these findings contrast with the studies by HSRC[i] and UCT[ii] in South Africa and [polling by ASH](#) in the UK,[iii] which report reductions in tobacco product consumption and increased efforts to quit.
  - FSFW President Dereck Yach also published an [article](#) in the Times of India quoting ASH UK's Deborah Arnott in an attempt to claim alignment between the Foundation and a respected public health expert. In 2019 ASH signed an open letter to the WHO Executive Board urging them not to engage with FSFW.

## Additional resources

See the [British Medical Journal blog](#) for the latest updates on the science of COVID-19 and tobacco.

## Tobacco Product and Brand Marketing During COVID-19

- The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids have been investigating and reporting instances of tobacco companies using the lockdown and stay at home advice to promote their brands on social media: [BIG TOBACCO IS EXPLOITING COVID-19 TO MARKET ITS HARMFUL PRODUCTS](#). One example being BAT's Glo facemasks worn by influencers in Kazakhstan, as reported [here](#) by STOP's Andy Rowell and seen in this image:
- CTFK reports that PMI has referred to COVID-19 on social media to promote special offers and home delivery on its vape products "in at least 18 countries (Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Canada, Greece, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Moldova, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, UK, and Ukraine)".<sup>25</sup>
- In Mexico a report was published on how "[The tobacco industry takes advantage of a pandemic despite selling a product that aggravated COVID-19](#)", which details PMI and BAT social media campaigns promoting deals and free trials on their vape products.<sup>26</sup>

## 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](mailto:bath@exposetobacco.org). The next update will be on June 4, 2020.

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



- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.pmi.com/investor-relations/press-releases-and-events/2020-annual-meeting?eventId=22281>
- <sup>2</sup> <http://investor.altria.com/Cache/IRCache/34d5b4d5-723e-10d3-9aad-f876abb92a52.PDF?O=PDF&T=&Y=&D=&FID=34d5b4d5-723e-10d3-9aad-f876abb92a52&iid=4087349>
- <sup>3</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=261203385048578&ref=watch\\_permalink](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=261203385048578&ref=watch_permalink)
- <sup>4</sup> <http://www.koreaitimes.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=97355>
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.msn.com/en-us/travel/news/good-news-amid-pandemic-louisville-construction-company-builds-homes-for-people-in-need/ar-BB13z5Da>
- <sup>6</sup> <https://news.sol.org.tr/tobacco-companies-break-ban-donating-turkeys-presidential-fundraising-campaign-176719>
- <sup>7</sup> <https://www.timesnownews.com/health/article/covid-19-british-cigarette-company-claims-tobacco-based-coronavirus-vaccine-ready-for-human-trials/592709>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/265775-la-vuelta-de-los-cigarrillos-se-demora>
- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.pmi.com/investor-relations/press-releases-and-events/2020-annual-meeting?eventId=22281>
- <sup>10</sup> <http://supercampo.perfil.com/2020/05/cuarentena-fabricas-cigarrillos-vuelven-producir/>
- <sup>11</sup> [https://argentina.as.com/argentina/2020/04/29/tikitakas/1588168329\\_182475.html](https://argentina.as.com/argentina/2020/04/29/tikitakas/1588168329_182475.html)
- <sup>12</sup> <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/indonesia-quarantines-over-500-philip-morris-factory-workers>
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.thestandard.com.hk/breaking-news/section/6/146658/Indonesia-to-recall-cigarettes-from-Philip-Morris-owned-plant>
- <sup>14</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/658422-tobacco-company-sealed-after-44-workers-found-covid-19-positive> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/658831-45-more-workers-of-tobacco-company-test-positive-for-covid-19>
- <sup>15</sup> <https://www.fin24.com/Economy/sas-largest-cigarette-company-drops-proposed-legal-action-against-tobacco-ban-20200506>
- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.enca.com/news/court-battle-over-tobacco-ban-hold>
- <sup>17</sup> <http://www.reep.uct.ac.za/news/lighting-illicit-market-report-smoker%E2%80%99s-responses-cigarette-sales-ban-south-africa>
- <sup>18</sup> <https://twitter.com/swimdaily/status/1261675978205560832?s=20>
- <sup>19</sup> <https://m.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/has-the-ban-on-cigarette-sales-deterred-smokers-this-is-what-the-studies-show-20200518>
- <sup>20</sup> <https://albertonrecord.co.za/270271/sponsored-japan-tobacco-international-urges-sa-government-to-reconsider-tobacco-ban-during-lockdown-level-4/>
- <sup>21</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8306781/Researchers-uncover-evidence-smokers-protected-deadly-coronavirus.html>
- <sup>22</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/05/12/can-afford-ignore-growing-link-nicotine-covid-19-survival/>
- <sup>23</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/ntr/advance-article/doi/10.1093/ntr/ntaa082/5835834>
- <sup>24</sup> <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.05.06.20092999v1.full.pdf>
- <sup>25</sup> <https://www.prweek.com/article/1683314/big-tobacco-using-covid-19-messaging-influencers-market-products>
- <sup>26</sup> <https://mundodehoy.com/2020/05/12/industria-tabacalera-aprovecha-la-pandemia/>