India: PM’s bravery awards “nothing to do with our products”

According to Godfrey Phillips, the Indian subsidiary of Philip Morris that makes Red & White cigarettes, the emphasis of the Red & White bravery awards is “selfless action”. The same phrase could hardly describe the company’s motives for using the name of its cigarette brand instead of its company name for the scheme, whose well funded advertising campaign associates its cigarettes with bravery (see Tobacco Control 2002;11:10–11, 91). With not only the brand’s name but also its distinctive colours used in the awards scheme promotions, and details of the cigarette brand just a click or two away from nauseating descriptions of the scheme on the company’s website, one might have thought the manufacturers would be forced to admit to the connection. Recently, an opportunity arose for a little candour on the subject.

Faced with an all male list of award winners in the state of Maharashtra, the Red & White judges added a special award for the highly publicity friendly “Bollywood” film star Preity Zinta. It recognised her bravery in sticking to her original story in a high profile court case in which a central theme of the prosecution was that key figures in Bollywood were linked to organised crime. Her steady testimony was all the more praiseworthy because other witnesses had withdrawn their earlier statements. Zinta claimed to have received threatening calls from the underworld while she was shooting for the film Chori Chori Chupke Chupke in 2000.

Not surprisingly, press reports of the case referred to sinister people who make vast sums of money from, among other things, peddling illegal, addictive drugs, without regard to the devastating effects on the health of those who consume them. Many journalists overlooked the fact that Red & White, even if not illegal, is a cigarette brand, energetically promoted by people who make vast sums of money from, etc. But in an interview with The Times of India, it was put to Mr Sanjeev Verma, managing director of Godfrey Phillips, that the Red & White bravery awards were really a means of advertising Red & White cigarettes. Extraordinary as it may seem, he denied that the scheme had any connection with the brand. “The awards are a salute to bravery,” he said. “They have nothing to do with our products.”

Serbia: tough times ahead

In February, Yugoslavia became a federal state called the Republic of Serbia and Montenegro. Through times of war, internal strife and economic hardship, health has taken a back seat. Now Serbia, emerging from international isolation, is on the brink of another catastrophe—an epidemic of tobacco deaths.

In Serbia, every second man smokes, as does every third woman, and every fourth teenager. The past three decades have seen a dramatic increase in smoking among women, and among secondary school and college students. Cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and lung diseases—already the leading causes of death in Serbia—are rocketing. Although Serbia has a thriving domestic tobacco industry, the transnational companies are not far behind. Alongside local brands, Serbs puff on Lucky Strike, Marlboro, and—for those who can afford it—Davidoff. In spring, Belgrade hosted its International Film Festival. The main sponsor was BAT.

As former Yugoslavia, the country was a key destination and shipment route for smuggled tobacco, and transnational tobacco companies have shown a keen interest in domestic production (see Tobacco Control 2002;11:92–3). Health interests campaigned for measures to curb domestic production, prevent transnational companies from taking control, and ban all tobacco advertising. New tobacco legislation enacted in February provides low interest loans for tobacco growing and manufacturing and a licensing system for tobacco manufacturers. The transnationals seem poised to pounce.

While the legislation may go some way towards combatting smuggling, it pays scant attention to health. The only provisions are to ban tobacco sales to under 18s, and require health warnings—size unspecified—on packs. The future of legislation to regulate tobacco advertising seems uncertain, following the assassination in March of the prime minister, Zoran Djindjic.

But some progress is being made. A National Commission for Prevention of Smoking has been formed, and a campaign launched in partnership with government and NGOs. Support has come from the World Health Organization, the European Agency for Reconstruction, the Canadian International Development Agency, and UNICEF. Philip Morris also offered its help—and was refused.

The first phase of the campaign concentrates on health professionals, in the hope that their lead will influence others. The target may not seem easy: more than one in three doctors (37%), and one in two nurses (52%) smoke. More than four out of 10 (42%) family doctors and one in four (25%) paediatricians smoke. But more than eight out of 10 (85%) have tried to stop, citing in the main health concerns—and just as many say they advise their patients to quit.

Concern about the health effects of smoking is high: 85% of smokers are worried about the effect of second-hand smoke on children, and 75% of smokers worry about their own health. The campaign aims to tackle both these concerns, by targeting the