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'Mr Death' clouds KL tobacco convention

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Two teenagers, driven both by religion and a desire to prevent non-smokers from succumbing to lung cancer been handing out [anti-smoking pamphlets](#) to tobacco executives attending a major industry convention in Kuala Lumpur since yesterday.

"I want to save people from picking up the smoking habit," said 13-year-old Ahmad Asyraf Shaari, a Third Former who believes that his efforts reflect his Muslim beliefs. "I will get 'pahala' (benefits) from Allah".

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He was accompanied by his cousin Muhammad Solehin Kamaruzaman, 16, who believed that smoking could lead his peers to drug abuse.

"Teens face a lot of pressure from their peers to smoke or they come from broken families where there is a lack of love and care from parents or friends," he explained.

"We are doing this in the hope that it will create some awareness on the ill effects of smoking among visitors to this convention."

The Tabinfo 2005 convention is touted to be the largest Asian tobacco machinery event with over 200 exhibitors from 60 countries, including suppliers of papers, filters, tipping paper, tobacco, adhesives and packaging materials.

A disclaimer on the convention's website says it is "closed to the general public".

The event will also see a gathering of key tobacco executives from companies in Austria, the Netherlands, Poland, Canada, China, India, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Switzerland, Britain and the US.

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Deaf ears

The protest group outside the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre group was led by Ahmad Asyraf's father, Malaysian Council for Tobacco Control (MCTC) Honorary-Secretary Shaari Ahmad Junid and Fomca Vice-President K Koris.

"We tried getting a permit at the Dang Wangi district police headquarters but we were informed that one would be granted only tomorrow, after the three-day event



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ends, but what's the point?"

"This is why we requested for help all the way from Canada. It is indeed a very sad day because Malaysians cannot openly and actively protest against the tobacco industry themselves. Our appeals to [protest](#) have so far fallen on deaf ears," he said.

To ensure that their protests against the tobacco industry were seen and heard, the MCTC enlisted help from Canada in the form of the 'Grim Reaper who appeared in full gear complete with black cape, gloves holding a giant 'scythe'.



At the centre, despite assurances by the organisers that the event would be strictly by-invitation only, scores of people were seen walking around wearing visitor passes.

"Although the Health Ministry and the government said this would be limited only to industry people, I believe that anyone can enter upon registering themselves at the entrance," Shaari said.

Earlier, Shaari showed journalists samples of tobacco strips with very strong fruity flavours such as cherry and vanilla as well as packets of colourful filters he had picked up from the exhibition hall.



"As a father, I'm very worried about this new trend. Currently, there are no fruit-flavoured cigarettes sold in Malaysia but if this is not to target young children, why exhibit such flavours at all?" he said, referring to industry denials that children were not their target group.

Shaari, who is also Malaysian Association of Environmental

Health president, said he also discovered that tobacco executives were discussing an overview of the health warning against tobacco smoking issued by governments.

'Kiddie packs'

Asked if he knew the reason behind Kuala Lumpur City Hall's (DBKL) approval of the event given the national 'Tak Nak' no-smoking campaign and the protests registered early this year, Shaari said he had not been told why.

In [an interview](#) with malaysiakini in June, Shaari had highlighted specific laws and guidelines which he described as absurd because they hampered tobacco-control efforts.

Meanwhile, the man in the Grim Reaper costume, Errol E Povah, warned that the tobacco industry was actively targeting the younger generation while in the same denying such a charge.

"How many people whom you know had picked up smoking after they turned 18? I'd say maybe one or



two.

“Most people would have picked up the habit earlier in their teens, thanks to kiddie packs (small packs),” said Povah who is Action on Smoking & Health (Airspace) president, an organisation based in Canada.



"I'm not saying that Canada has resolved the tobacco issue and I'm not here to fix the issue in Malaysia but if the (Malaysian government) is doing its job, I won't be here today."

He said despite all the denials, the 'merchants of death' as he described the tobacco executives, were actively targeting children.



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