Statement from Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General, World Health Organization

GENEVA 15 August 2012 - The World Health Organization (WHO) strongly welcomes the landmark decision from Australia's High Court to dismiss a legal challenge from the tobacco industry, and calls on the rest of the world to follow Australia's tough stance on tobacco marketing.

Several major tobacco companies challenged Australia's legislation to require cigarettes and other tobacco products to be sold in plain packaging without any branding. But the industry's attempt to derail this effective tobacco control measure failed. As of December 2012, Australia will be the first country to sell cigarettes in drab, olive-green packaging without branding.

With Australia's victory, public health enters a brave new world of tobacco control. Plain packaging is a highly effective way to counter industry's ruthless marketing tactics. It is also fully in line with the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. The lawsuits filed by Big Tobacco look like the death throes of a desperate industry. With so many countries lined up to ride on Australia's coattails, what we hope to see is a domino effect for the good of public health.

The case is being watched closely by several other countries who are considering similar measures to help fight tobacco.

The evidence on the positive health impact of plain packaging compiled by Australia’s High Court will benefit other countries in their efforts to develop and implement strong tobacco control measures to protect the health of their people and to stand resolute against the advances of the tobacco industry.

Tobacco use is one of the most preventable public health threats. Tobacco products will eventually kill up to half of the people who use them – that means nearly 6 million people die each year. If governments do not take strong action to limit exposures to tobacco, by 2030 it could kill more than 8 million people each year.

The WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control entered into force in 2005. Parties are obliged over time to take a number of steps to reduce demand and supply for tobacco products including: protecting people from exposure to tobacco smoke, counteracting illicit trade, banning advertising, promotion and sponsorship, banning sales to minors, putting large health warnings on packages of tobacco, increasing tobacco taxes and creating a national coordinating mechanism for tobacco control. More than 170 countries are Parties to the Convention.