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The decision of British America Tobacco Nigeria (BATN) to carry on with secret smoking parties where underage persons are conscripted into smoking is not only offensive but a strategy of getting more girls to take to the smoking habit, foremost environmental rights advocacy group, Environmental Rights Action (ERA) has said.

ERA, in reaction to a smoking party organised by BAT as part of its Bursting with Flavour promotion of the Pall Mall brand in Lagos, said the event was 'a shameless disregard for public health and lack of respect to the laws of the country.

In the last two years BAT has staged the smoking parties in Sokoto, Kano, Ilorin, Akure, Abeokuta, Ibadan and other parts of the country. The latest party held last Saturday August 7, 2010 at the Abayomi Awodiora Hall on Cardoso Street in Ajegunle area of Lagos.

In a statement wired from Lagos, to our correspondent ERA described the event as a criminal and clandestine act by BATN, describing the company as a corporation bent on ruining the lives of young Nigerians who are the major targets of the secret smoking parties.

It is incredible that even with the growing number of Nigerians dying from tobacco-related illnesses and confirmed studies that tobacco use worsens poverty, the only fitting contribution of BAT to Ajegunle is a product that will gradually kill off its army of youths, said ERA/ FoEN Director, Corporate Accountability Campaigns, Akinbode Oluwafemi.

Oluwafemi added that it was extremely disappointing that Terry G, a notable hip-hop artist and supposed youth role model who should be an ambassador of change in Ajegunle performed live at the event which started 10 p.m and ended 4 am on the following morning.

The ERA team that conducted the investigation confirmed that not only was there a secrecy around the distribution of the invitation cards, but also that there was tight security at the

entrance of the hall with stern-looking security personnel frisking invitees to ensure nobody went in with a camera or any gadget that could document findings. No invitee was asked his/her age.

Inside the hall, skimpily-dressed girls were assigned the roles of welcoming youngsters who were christened 'consumers'. The girls offer the consumers the Pall Mall brand of cigarette and immediately light it up. It was also observed that while the party was on with heavy plume of smoke from cigarette, officials of BAT were at the upper floor of hall cautiously observing the activities below.

Reiterating ERA opposition to the event, Oluwafemi said We will not take this henceforth. We will mobilise youths to storm and disrupt any other attempt to enlist our youths into smoking.

We hope the National Assembly is taking note of this other objectionable activity of BATN. It is now time for our lawmakers to expedite action on the National Tobacco Control Bill which will compel tobacco companies in Nigeria to halt their double standards of operation. We will not accept this any longer .