

Bhutanese protest tobacco charge against Buddhist monk

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NEW DELHI (RNS) Protesters in Bhutan are denouncing the three-year prison sentence of a Buddhist monk charged with violating the small kingdom's anti-tobacco law.

The 23-year-old monk, Sonam Tshering, was the first victim of a ban rooted in the religious zeal of Bhutanese elders who believe smoking defiles sacred spaces, according to local media reports.

The police nabbed the monk in the capital city of Thimphu with 48 packets of chewing tobacco he had bought from neighboring India.

Last month, a court punished the monk for not paying import taxes under the Tobacco Control Act, a 2010 law that levies 100-percent tax on tobacco intended for personal consumption.

The act cites concerns about tobacco "from a spiritual and social health point of view," and states that "physical health and wellbeing" are under the purview of Bhutan's unique Gross National Happiness (GNH) policy.

Bhutan is best known in the West for its GNH index, based on Buddhist principles to measure the nation's progress in terms of wellbeing and not economic growth alone. Bhutan aims to be the world's

first smoke-free nation.