

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: POL 30/019/2007 (Public)
News Service No: 161
21 August 2007

Statement from Amnesty International in response to Vatican Secretary of State

Yesterday the Vatican's Secretary of State, Tarcisio Bertone, commented on Amnesty International's policy on sexual and reproductive rights -- including on selected aspects of abortion -- and said that the view of the Vatican is that abortion should not be available to rape victims.

Amnesty International's policy on sexual and reproductive rights does not promote abortion as a universal right and the organization remains silent on the rights or wrongs of abortion. The policy recognizes women's human rights to be free of fear, threat and coercion as they manage all consequences of rape and other grave human rights violations. Amnesty International stands by its policy, adopted in April this year, that aims to support the decriminalisation of abortion, to ensure women have access to health care when complications arise from abortion and to defend women's access to abortion -- within reasonable gestational limits -- when their health or life are in danger.

At its International Council Meeting held in Mexico last week, Amnesty International's leaders committed the organization to strengthening its work on the prevention of unwanted pregnancies and other factors contributing to women's recourse to abortion and overwhelmingly affirmed the organization's policy on selected aspects of abortion. More than 400 Amnesty International representatives from more than 75 countries -- of many different nationalities, ethnicities, ages, religions and cultures -- attended the meeting and affirmed Amnesty International's commitment to women's human rights.

Amnesty International first considered the question of whether there were human rights issues implicated in the question of abortion around two years ago as part of its work on the organization's global campaign to Stop Violence Against Women. Amnesty International's position is consistent with international human rights and humanitarian law and was arrived at following extensive consultation with its membership. Amnesty International actively explored what the human rights issues related to abortion are and found that:

- o women are sentenced to death for obtaining an abortion after trials that fail to meet international human rights standards for fair trials in countries such as Nigeria;
- o women are arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned for having abortions when the evidence supported their defense of having had a spontaneous miscarriage; and
- o women with ectopic pregnancies (when the embryo attaches to the fallopian tube and has no chance of survival but when untreated can cause the fallopian tube to burst, threatening the woman's life and, if she survives, her fertility) were denied life saving medical intervention.

In addition, Amnesty International documented cases of sexual violence in armed conflict that were devastating to women and lead to their ostracization. This trauma and exclusion was exacerbated when the sexual violence (typically in the form of gang rape) resulted in an unwanted pregnancy. Women and girls who were raped, including by family members, in non-conflict situations were also forced to carry the pregnancy to term.

Amnesty International also learned that, unlike in any other situation, medical service providers will often refuse to treat women suffering from complications related to abortion. There is no analogous treatment, i.e., the denial of medical services because the person in need of medical treatment is perceived or alleged to have committed a crime. People who overdose on drugs that are deemed illegal receive treatment, suspects in violent crimes who are shot or otherwise injured in the course of the crime receive medical treatment, and combatants in armed conflict who are *hors de combat* receive medical treatment. But women are denied this treatment, reflecting the exceptionalism around the issue of abortion.

Amnesty International finds it unacceptable for women to be imprisoned for seeking or obtaining an abortion, or for women to be denied access to abortion services even when the UN Committee on Human Rights has held that forcing a woman to carry a pregnancy to term that was a result of sexual violence in armed conflict is a form of torture; and in non-conflict situations cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Amnesty International finds the preventable death of 70,000 women per year -- and the denial of medical services in a range of circumstances from ectopic pregnancies to complications from unsafe abortions -- to be unacceptable. These are a violation of a woman's right to life, right to health, right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman degrading treatment and punishment and the right to non-discrimination.

In response to the position of the Vatican's Secretary of State, Amnesty International notes the right of the Vatican to hold its views on abortion and acknowledges human rights issues on which common ground does exist, including work against the death penalty, the release of prisoners of conscience and the abolition of torture. Amnesty International vigorously defends and respects the rights of individuals to exercise their right to freedom of expression and freedom of association. The matter of whether individuals, of any faith, agree with or oppose Amnesty International's policy on sexual and reproductive rights, which includes selected aspects on abortion, is for the individual to decide and should be respected.

To read more about Amnesty International's work on sexual and reproductive rights, please go to:
http://web.amnesty.org/actforwomen/sexual_and_reproductive_rights-enghttp://web.amnesty.org/actforwomen/sexual_and_reproductive_rights-eng

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>