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## **Dominican Republic: Changes to constitution will put women's lives in danger**

Amnesty International today warned that proposed changes to the Constitution of the Dominican Republic will put women and girls at risk and potentially increase maternal deaths in the country. The country's Parliament is scheduled to vote on a constitutional reform package on Thursday.

The proposed formulation of Article 30 would introduce inviolability of life from "conception to death". It is widely acknowledged that this will lead to changes in the Penal Code that could lead to a ban on abortions in all circumstances.

If the article is approved as proposed, it would severely limit the availability of safe abortions, even in cases when a woman is suffering from life-threatening complications or is in need of life-saving treatment incompatible with pregnancy – such as that for malaria, cancer or HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, access to safe abortion for women or girls who have unwanted pregnancies as a result of rape or incest would become even more restricted.

"As it stands, the proposed change to the Constitution would have a devastating impact on women's and girls' access to effective reproductive health care in the Dominican Republic," said Susan Lee, Americas Director at Amnesty International.

The Dominican Society of Obstetrics and Gynaecologists has pointed out the "catastrophic" impact that Article 30 could have on maternal mortality. If adopted in its current formulation, Article 30 would compromise doctors' ability to provide timely and effective treatment for women and girls suffering complications during pregnancy.

"When abortion is totally banned, the rates of maternal mortality grow because doctors are unable or fearful of providing life-saving treatment that is contraindicated with pregnancy, even when it's the only way to save the patient," said Susan Lee.

Amnesty International recently published a report looking at the impact of the total ban on all forms of abortion in Nicaragua. It found that the ban is contributing to an increase in maternal deaths across the country -- 33 girls and women have died in pregnancy so far in 2009 compared to 20 in the same period last year. Because of inadequacies in the country's collection of maternal health data, these official figures are believed to be only a minimum.

"In the very few countries that have total bans on abortions, many doctors, due to fear of being prosecuted, delay the delivery of effective medical treatment or feel justified in refusing it, even when it might result in the death of the pregnant woman or long-term damage to her health," said Susan Lee.

“Four UN treaty bodies have strongly criticized Nicaragua’s full ban on abortions because of the risks it places on women’s and girls’ lives and health. The Dominican Republic should not follow the same steps,” said Susan Lee.

Amnesty International is calling on the Congress of the Dominican Republic to:

- reject the current formulation of constitutional Article 30 “since conception to death”;
- take all necessary measures to ensure that safe and legal abortion services are available, accessible, and of good quality for all women who require them in all cases where the pregnancy is a result of rape or incest and when the pregnancy poses a risk to the life or health of the woman.

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