

Family planning myopia

Denying U.N. funds would hurt poor families

Last year, President Bush tried to straddle the touchy issue of abortion. First, in keeping with his opposition to the practice, he reinstated a Reagan-era "gag rule" that denies U.S. funds to private overseas family planning groups that provide, advocate or even mention abortion as an option to

pregnant women. But later Bush asked Congress for \$25 million for the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, which provides a range of services to promote maternal and child health in poor countries but does not fund or promote abortions.

Congress approved the funding and authorized giving up to \$34 million to UNFPA, but left it on Bush to

decide the exact figure. Now the White House is delaying the release of any of the money. Although no reason has been given, renewed pressure to bar any U.S. funds for UNFPA is coming from anti-abortion groups, and especially from Rep. Christopher Smith, a New Jersey Republican who has been the most visible congressional opponent of family plan-

ning for years.

The argument, a false one, is that UNFPA condones abortion by giving money to China, a country long accused (in some cases perhaps with justification) of enforcing its one-child-only policy by forcing women who already have one child to be sterilized

or to abort subsequent pregnancies. U.N. officials, however, say that funds are provided only for use in Chinese provinces where there is no evidence that such coercive policies are used.

If Bush bows to right-wing pressure on this issue, the consequences could be serious. UNFPA estimates that \$34 million could help prevent 77,000 child



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and infant deaths, 80,000 maternal infections or injuries, 4,700 maternal deaths and 2 million unwanted pregnancies. Whatever the actual numbers, withholding U.S. funds would prevent so abortions. It would, however, visit a cruel hardship on families around the globe desperately in need of counseling and treatment.

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WHY DOESN'T BUSH?

President Bush's imposition of the Global Gag Rule and refusal to release \$34 million in UNFPA family planning funding has greatly damaged family planning programs all over the world.

The \$34 million could prevent 2 million unwanted pregnancies, nearly 800,000 abortions, 4,700 maternal deaths, almost 60,000 maternal illnesses and more than 77,000 infant and child deaths. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

It is a form of arrogance to impose a gag rule on doctors and health advocates in other countries as the price of receiving vital assistance for its poorest and most defenseless citizens, particularly its women, especially when it involves an activity that is constitutionally protected in the United States. The New York Times

At a time when the United States has become painfully aware of the consequences of neglecting basic needs in the developing world, it seems especially myopic to deny help for one of the most fundamental of needs—allowing women to exercise control over their fertility... It is ironic that after the President Bush's and Laura Bush's stirring words in support of Afghan women, he is now considering punishing an organization that is doing as much as any to assist them. Christian Science Monitor

Bush risks undermining work that is critical in developing countries when he joins in the view that one cent used to teach poor women to space out pregnancies for healthier families or to provide condoms and education to counter the spread of HIV/AIDS is a cent spent promoting abortion. President Bush should honor the decision of Congress and release the money to the U.N. Population Fund. Akron Beacon

George Bush just doesn't get the Population Connection.

