



Brian Dixon

Special Report: Bush Veers Right with Wrong Decision on UNFPA

by Brian Dixon, Director of Government Relations

First Lady Laura Bush said last year that “the fight against terrorism is a fight for the rights and dignity of women.”

Few agencies are doing as much to win that fight as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The Fund led a global effort to provide crucial reproductive health care and family planning services to women in refugee camps in and out of Afghanistan. In fact, Secretary of State Colin Powell praised UNFPA’s work in Afghanistan and provided an emergency grant of \$600,000. President Bush requested that Congress provide UNFPA with \$25 million in 2002. Congress voted to give them even more: \$34 million.

From the refugee crisis in Afghanistan to the scourge of female genital mutilation, from efforts to ensure trained medical assistance for pregnant women to providing contraceptives for health centers throughout the developing world, UNFPA has a long record of success. UNFPA has also been the key force in ensuring that women have the ability to choose the number and spacing of their children.

Reneging on a Promise

In a shocking and disastrous policy reversal, though, President George W. Bush announced that the U.S. would no longer provide any funding for the life-saving and world-improving work of UNFPA. The \$34 million that was approved by large, bipartisan majorities of both houses of Congress would be permanently withheld.

The administration claimed it was doing so because UNFPA supports China’s coercive population policies. While there is much evidence that the Chinese government has indeed engaged in coercion in its population program, there is no evidence that UNFPA has participated in, or supported, any coercive practices. In fact, numerous fact-finding teams, including one appointed by President Bush himself, have found that UNFPA works

to eliminate coercion in China’s program and to develop programs that give women choices in family planning.

Bush’s fact-finding team returned from its visit to UNFPA’s China program and recommended that the United States continue its funding. But Bush ignored the recommendation because a small, but vocal, group of religious conservatives have long opposed UNFPA and any agency that works to provide women with family planning information and contraceptives. These efforts are led by Congressman Chris Smith (R-NJ) and the Population Research Institute—both with stellar far-right credentials. Smith once called birth control pills “baby pesticides,” and PRI’s president described contraceptives as “offensive to human dignity.” Together with other individuals and organizations, they waged war to end funding for the agency. In the end, Bush canceled \$34 million that Congress voted to provide UNFPA.

There will be no improvement in the rights of women in China because of this action. UNFPA is the only voice for human rights within China’s population program; it is the only agency that has had any success in moving the Chinese government away from birth quotas and targets, and it has given Chinese women real choices in contraceptive methods.

UNFPA today works in 32 counties within China. As part of the agreement creating the project, China agreed to eliminate all birth quotas, to bar coercive practices, and to allow outside, independent monitoring of the program and investigation of any claims of coercion. As a result, the UNFPA China program is the most monitored international project in the world. Every legitimate monitoring visit has found the same thing: that UNFPA is making important strides in improving human rights for Chinese women.

It is obvious that Bush’s action was not about improving human rights in China—



because if that were the goal, there are far more effective means for the United States to use. And the Bush administration has not attempted to tie increased international trade to human rights. As Congressman Joe Crowley (D-NY) noted in a speech in the United States House of Representatives, the people who made this decision are the same ones pushing for increased trade with China. Crowley said, "It's okay for Motorola to build a factory in China and employ women, and through their factory health clinic share lists with the Family Planning Authorities on who is or who isn't having a baby. But [according to the Bush administration] it's not okay for UNFPA to work to educate women on their rights and eradicate coercion in family planning programs."

And just a month before announcing the UNFPA decision, the Bush administration announced a plan to provide the Chinese Ministry of Health—the very same Ministry that provides a large percentage of the abortions in China, the abortions that UNFPA opponents have seized on—with a nearly \$15 million grant to help address China's growing AIDS crisis.

Who Really Suffers

But it's not just women in China who will suffer from this disastrous decision. UNFPA works in 141 other countries to provide desperately needed services. As a result of this action, programs to provide subsidized contraceptives to couples in rural villages in India will be suspended. A project to upgrade health facilities and expand reproductive health services in Algeria will be delayed.

Women around the world who have come to rely on UNFPA assistance will find that assistance gone.

Experts have estimated that the loss of U.S. funding could result in two million additional unintended pregnancies, 4,700 maternal deaths, the deaths of 77,000 children under age 5 and 800,000 abortions. These are ironic results for a decision made to appease abortion opponents.

The decision ignited a firestorm of outrage after nearly a year of virtual immunity from criticism. Few foreign policy decisions by the Bush administration, or any recent administration for that matter, have been so blatantly based on domestic political considerations.

These considerations overrode the support UNFPA has from bipartisan majorities in both Houses



Health workers standing outside a family planning clinic in Ghana. Photo: JHU/CCP

of Congress, from Colin Powell, and from the administration's own "fact-finding" team. In fact, UNFPA's support is overwhelming.

UNFPA supporters in Congress are planning to react swiftly upon return to Washington. The Senate Appropriations Committee has already approved legislation that would boost the U.S. contribution to UNFPA to \$50 million and require the President to release it.

In the House, legislation has been introduced that would likewise ensure a contribution to UNFPA. Passage of such legislation is crucial to ensure that women in China and everywhere else have access to voluntary family planning and to protect their rights to determine whether and when to have children.

The concern for the women of China expressed by people like Rep. Smith and the Population Research Institute is underwhelming. They are not interested in ensuring these women have access to voluntary family planning; they are committed to eliminating the right of women to use contraceptives.

And the Bush action will do nothing to improve the lives of women in China. It will, in fact, make their lives—and the lives of poor women around the world—even worse. It punishes innocent women for the abuses of China's government.

That's unworthy of a great nation and needs to be reversed immediately.

Until Congress acts to restore funding to UNFPA, a group of individuals has decided to take matters into their own hands and is urging 34 million Americans to send one dollar each to UNFPA. If you'd like to participate, you can send a dollar to UNFPA at 220 E. 42nd Street, New York, NY 10017.