



*Advancing
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PRESS RELEASE

Global Health and Policy Experts Unite in Message to USAID: Rescind Decision to Deny Contraceptive Supplies in Africa

(Washington, D.C.)—Today, more than 140 leaders from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America—including Members of the European Parliament, development experts and leaders of HIV/AIDS, human rights, faith-based and reproductive health rights organizations—called on the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to reverse its recent decision to interfere with Marie Stopes International’s (MSI) access to contraceptive supplies in Africa. The group of world leaders submitted a joint statement to Kent Hill, Assistant Administrator for the Bureau for Global Health at USAID, in protest of the action that they call politically motivated.

The letter asks that USAID rescind its instructions to U.S. Missions to urge host governments to ensure that U.S.-donated contraceptive supplies do not reach MSI, a London-based organization that provides sexual and reproductive health services in developing countries. In the letter, leaders state that imposing an onerous task on countries with over-burdened health systems such as separating out donated contraceptive supplies is “unjust and violates the rights of individuals to enjoy—and impedes government commitments to provide—the highest attainable standard of health.”

In early September, Bush administration officials instructed USAID personnel in six African countries to ensure that recipient governments do not pass on U.S.-donated contraceptive supplies to MSI. According to MSI, this will “seriously disrupt” family planning programs in Ghana, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe—leaving women and families with few family planning and HIV prevention options and increasing the likelihood of unsafe abortion and maternal death.

“This decision has sent shockwaves across the world,” said Mabel Bianco, Director of the Foundation for Studies and Research on Women in Argentina. “Leaders globally are outraged that the U.S. government is playing politics with the lives of women in developing countries by subverting public health interventions that reduce maternal deaths.”

“How can the U.S. turn a blind eye to the damage this decision will inflict upon the health and rights of women and families in countries like my own?” stated Bernice Heloo, President of the Society of Women Against AIDS in Africa, based in Ghana. “What do they say to these women who are poor and underserved and who desperately wish to delay or prevent childbearing—‘too bad, you have to find someplace else to go’?”

The Bush administration justifies its action by citing a provision in U.S. law called the Kemp-Kasten Amendment, which prohibits funding for entities that support or promote coercive abortion or involuntary sterilization. The U.S. government, however, has not provided evidence that MSI supports or promotes these practices, and the U.S. does not fund MSI. The administration asserts that MSI's work with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in China, which in turn has been accused of violating Kemp-Kasten, justifies its action. The accusations against UNFPA have been disproved by many sources, including a delegation sent by the State Department in 2002.

“The Bush administration is using its final months to radically distort the interpretation of Kemp-Kasten, moving the bar to further restrict sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls abroad,” stated Serra Sippel, Executive Director of the Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE), a U.S.-based NGO. “The administration is leaving a legacy of hostility toward common-sense approaches that protect women's lives and health.”

In a separate action earlier this month, U.S. women's health and rights advocates alerted by CHANGE sent more than 140 emails to Kent Hill at USAID protesting the move. In response, USAID has set up an auto-reply to these emails in an attempt to justify its decision.

Marie Stopes International operates a total of 89 clinics in the six countries, providing family planning and HIV prevention services for thousands of women and men. The organization reports that in one of the six countries, it is responsible for 25% of all family planning services. The decision by USAID may cause these clinics to experience severe shortages of contraceptives, and early evidence suggests that there have already been major complications with the storage and distribution of contraceptive supplies in some of the affected countries.

Among the signatories of the letter are Anne Van Lancker, MEP, Belgium; Irene Khan, Secretary General, Amnesty International, UK; Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, General Secretary, World YWCA, Switzerland; Doo Aphane, Executive Director, Lutheran Development Service, Swaziland; Saira Shameem, Executive Director, Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), Malaysia; Richard Burzynski, Executive Director, International Council of AIDS Service Organizations (ICASO), Canada; Gabriela Leite, Executive Director, Davida - Prostituição, Direitos Civis, Saúde, Brazil; and Steven Sinding, Former Director, Office of Population, USAID (1983-1986) and Former Director, USAID Mission to Kenya (1986-1990).

To read the international sign-on letter, please visit:

<http://www.genderhealth.org/pubs/2008.msi-intlsignon.pr.pdf>

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The Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE) is a U.S.-based non-governmental organization that seeks to ensure that U.S. international policies and programs promote sexual and reproductive health and rights through effective, evidence-based approaches to prevention and treatment of critical reproductive and sexual health concerns, and through increased funding for critical international programs and institutions.

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