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Family planning to be core of British overseas aid

by Simon Caldwell by Catholic News Service

LONDON -- The British government has announced proposals to "hard-wire" abortion and contraceptive services into its overseas development programs.

Andrew Mitchell, secretary of state for international development, told a conference in London July 27 that the government was preparing an "unprecedented focus" on family planning in the poorest countries of the world.

He said the new approach was necessary to meet the Millennium Development Goal of reducing by three-quarters the maternal mortality ratios of poor countries by 2015 from their positions in 1990.

Reproductive and maternal health was "the most off-track" of all the Millennium Development Goals, he said at the launch of the government's consultation, "Choice for Women -- Wanted Pregnancies, Safe Births."

"The international community has failed to assist millions of women by ignoring the complexities of why at least a third of a million women in the world's poorest countries die during pregnancy and childbirth each year," he said. "For too long we've been trying to tackle the issue with one hand tied behind our backs.

"The Department for International Development will now have an unprecedented focus on family planning, which will be hard-wired into all our country programs," he said.

A spokeswoman for the international development department told CNS July 29 that concrete proposals would be formulated only after the 12-week consultation exercise, in which the government seeks the views of interested parties, is completed Oct. 20.

She said there were "no suggestions at all at the moment" that the government would impose abortion and contraception services as a condition of receiving development aid.

"The government has identified family planning as a key way of reducing child and maternal deaths and what we are doing now is consulting on how we should implement policy on that," she said. "It is something the government feels strongly about."

A July 27 government press statement said a key focus of any new policy will be to combat unsafe abortion. It said there were 70,000 deaths a year from an estimated 20 million unsafe abortions, with about 8 million women also needing medical treatment for complications arising from them.

"Ensuring abortion services are safe, and that post-abortion care is provided, saves lives," the statement said. "And increasing access to family planning will avert many thousands of unintended pregnancies and abortions every year."

The statement also claimed that 215 million women in poor countries would like to either delay or avoid their next pregnancy but had no access to "modern family planning methods" such as "implants, injectables and intrauterine devices."

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"Increasing access could prevent up to 30 percent of all maternal deaths and 20 percent of newborn deaths," it said.

The English and Welsh Catholic bishops' conference declined to comment on the proposals, but one senior official told CNS, on condition of anonymity, that he thought they were "out of Alice in Wonderland."

"Not a single death in pregnancy or childbirth can be prevented by contraception, because women who are not pregnant cannot form part of pregnancy mortality statistics," he said in a July 28 e-mail.

"More to the point, if you are really concerned about pregnancy mortality, surely the answer is to provide better care for pregnant women?" he said.

Anthony Ozimic of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, a British pro-life lobby group, said in a July 28 statement to CNS, "There is absolutely no truth to the claim that increasing access to abortion will prevent the deaths of mothers and newborns.

"In fact, the evidence suggests that the best way prevent such deaths is by improving access to real health care," he said.

"Abortion is not health care but an attack on life. Abortion doesn't treat the real reasons why a mother's life or health may be in danger. The direct, intentional killing of an unborn child is never necessary to save the life of a mother," he said.

In June, the Group of Eight industrialized nations pledged to prevent 1.3 million infant and 64,000 maternal deaths a year, partly by extending family planning services to 12 million women and partly by increasing professional services to women in childbirth.

The risk of death from complications in childbirth were one in eight in countries such as Sierra Leone or Afghanistan compared with one in 8,200 in Britain, according to the British government statement.

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