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Indian court issues 'passive euthanasia' ruling

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BANGALORE, India -- The Supreme Court of India has rejected the plea for mercy killing for a nurse who has been in a semi-comatose condition for 37 years.

However, the court set out guidelines for passive euthanasia -- "withholding of medical treatment for continuance of life, e.g. withholding of antibiotics where without giving it a patient is likely to die, or removing the heart lung machine, from a patient in coma" -- and said passive euthanasia would now become law until Parliament enacts legislation to deal with the issue.

The ruling came March 7 in a petition on behalf of 63-year-old Aruna Shanbaug, who has been in a persistent vegetative state since 1973 in King Edward Memorial Hospital in Mumbai. She slipped into that state after being deprived of oxygen during an assault at the same hospital.

While delivering the judgment, the court congratulated the hospital and its staff for the "loving care" extended to the nurse. As the news of the court ruling was announced, hospital staff gathered to celebrate.

Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Mumbai, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, told Catholic News Service, "The church is happy and relieved that the court has rejected this (mercy killing) plea."

The cardinal said he was disappointed by the part of the verdict allowing passive euthanasia, since "allowing one to die amounts to actively supporting taking away one's life."

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