NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Mention of reproductive health bill in Philippines' president's speech seen as endorsement

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QUEZON CITY, Philippines -- President Benigno Aquino III's mention of responsible parenthood [1] in his State of the Nation Address at the Philippine Congress on Monday was regarded as endorsement for the reproductive health bill that has been pending in Congress for 14 years.

Reporting on his administration's progress in public education and challenges the sector faces, Aquino said, "We are ending the backlogs in the education sector, but the potential for shortages remains as our student population continues to increase. Perhaps Responsible Parenthood can help address this."

The remark received loud applause [2] in the hall of the Congress building in Quezon City, according to media reports. Members of the 15th Congress of the Philippines, including 23 senators, 230 House representatives, Cabinet members and diplomats, attended the address.

Outside, activists protesting high prices of oil, joblessness and "anti-poor" policies clashed with riot police [3], who maintained their defensive posture as protestors pushed against a metal divider to where police were lined up on Commonwealth Avenue, leading to the Congress Building Complex.

Reporter Andreo Calonzo [4] of GMA News writes that the remark was a call for Congress to pass the controversial bill [5], which is opposed by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines and pro-life groups in the country and abroad.

In his speech, Aquino said there are shortages in classrooms, chairs and textbooks. He expressed his "great faith" in La Salle Br. Armin Luistro [6], the secretary of education, to fill these shortages by 2013.

Fr. Melvin Castro, executive secretary of the bishops' conference's Episcopal Commission on Family and Life, said [7] Aquino's remarks seemed to push for immediate passage of the Reproductive Health Bill.

He expressed sadness over the revelation that the proposed bill -- or Aquino's version of it, called Responsible Parenthood bill -- is not about health, but about birth control.

Aquino's speech, which lasted more than an hour, detailed accomplishments, plans and targets of his administration, as well as officials responsible for these. He said the administration's anti-corruption drive will continue, and it will exercise its exclusive sovereignty over South China Sea, embark on upgrade of the military, and continue to fight hunger, poverty and unemployment, which he said decreased substantially in the last year.

He said these are not merely successes of his three-year administration at midpoint of his term as president.

"You made this happen," Aquino told the Filipino people, whom he called "boss."

In ending, he thanked his spiritual advisers Jesuit theologian Fr. Catalino Arevalo [8] and Mother Mary Agnes

Xavier Guillen, prioress of the community of contemplative Discalced Carmelite nuns in Zamboanga City, southern Philippines.

Read the English translation of Aquino's speech here [1].

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[1] http://www.gov.ph/2012/07/23/english-translation-benigno-s-aquino-iii-third-state-of-the-nation-address-july-23-2012/
[2] http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/07/23/12/rh-line-2012-sona-gets-loudest-applause
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[4] http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/266429/news/nation/aquino-in-3rd-sona-asks-congress-to-pass-rh-bill
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