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Irish government announces plans to legalize abortion, with limits

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The Irish government has announced plans to legalize abortion in limited circumstances, but Minister for Health James Reilly insisted his plans will take "full account of the equal right to life of the unborn child."

The announcement contradicts a 2011 campaign promise by Prime Minister Enda Kenny that his government would not introduce abortion in the predominantly Catholic country.

In practice, abortion has been illegal in Ireland under 1861 legislation. However, a 1992 Supreme Court judgment -- known as the X case -- found that there is a constitutional right to abortion where there is a substantial risk to the life of the mother, including the risk of suicide, up to birth.

Successive governments have not acted on the issue. However, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2010 that Ireland must clarify when women can access abortion under the 1992 ruling.

After a Cabinet meeting Tuesday, Reilly announced that the government would introduce legislation to allow abortion where there is a risk to the life of the mother, including the threat of suicide. He also confirmed that the government intends to decriminalize abortion in these circumstances.

Speaking after the Cabinet meeting, Reilly said the legislation would clarify "what is available by way of treatment to a woman when a pregnancy gives rise to a threat to a woman's life."

"We will also clarify what is legal for the professionals who must provide that care, while at all times taking full account of the equal right to life of the unborn child," he said.

However, Ruth Cullen, spokeswoman for Ireland's Pro-Life Campaign, said that "any legislation for the X case would blur the distinction between life-saving medical interventions in pregnancy and induced abortion, the sole aim of which is to intentionally end the life of the baby.

"Once it is conceded that some human lives may be directly targeted there is no going back. Inevitably over time the grounds for abortion would be widened," she said.

There was no immediate reaction from members of the Irish bishops' conference. However, in November Bishop William Murphy of Kerry warned that experience has shown that "if abortion is introduced, even on a very limited basis, it becomes widespread."

The Irish parliament will debate the proposed legislation in early 2013. Several legislators from Kenny's Fine Gael party have indicated that they would oppose the legislation.

Pro-life campaigners are calling for a mass rally Jan. 19 to express opposition to legislation.

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