

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 23, 2009 at 4:27pm

Obama rescinds controversial abortion policy

by Jerry Filteau by NCR Staff



President Barack Obama prays at the National Cathedral in Washington on his first full day as president Jan. 21. (CNS photo/Larry Downing, Reuters)

WASHINGTON

President Obama late Friday, through an executive order, reversed an eight-year Bush Administration policy, allowing the movement of tens of millions of U.S. foreign aid dollars to flow into family planning organizations abroad which advocate abortion or provide abortion services.

The Bush administration had restricted such aid to family planning organizations that had no abortion related activities in their family planning programs.

“For the past eight years, they have undermined efforts to promote safe and effective voluntary family planning in developing countries,” Obama said of the restrictions. “For these reasons, it is right for us to rescind this policy and restore critical efforts to protect and empower women and promote global economic development.”

In a written statement, Obama said he would work with Congress to restore financial support for the United Nations Population Fund. But he bemoaned the "politicization" of abortion and promised to reach out to all sides to initiate a new dialogue about reducing unintended pregnancies.

"For too long," he said, "international family planning assistance has been used as a political wedge issue, the subject of a back-and-forth debate that has served only to divide us. I have no desire to continue this stale and fruitless debate."

When Bill Clinton, a Democrat, took office in 1993, he chose Jan. 22, the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, the U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in America, to issue an order similar to the one Obama issued Friday.

Obama had avoided an overt confrontation with the tens of thousands of anti-abortion activists who came here Thursday to lobby against abortion. Every Jan. 22 tens of thousands of opponents of legalized abortion gather in the nation's capital, seeking a reversal of *Roe v. Wade*.

Many in the right-to-life movement took the symbolic timing of Clinton's decision in 1993 as a direct slap in the face.

Eight years later when George W. Bush took office, his first executive order was to reinstate the policy. He, too, chose Jan. 22 to issue the order, delighting those who oppose abortion but angering those who support it.

Thomas P. Melady, diplomat in residence at the Institute of World Politics, said Friday he was in Washington on Jan. 22, 1993, and was attending a reception with several U.S. cardinals who were in town for the March for Life, when a reporter came up to them and informed them of Clinton's executive order.

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"One of the cardinals said, "My, he didn't even give us (the pro-life marchers) the courtesy of waiting till we left town," said Melady, who at that time was U.S. ambassador to the Vatican. "That's the difference" this year, he added. "This president gave us the courtesy."

Obama promised during his campaign to rescind the policy and was expected to issue an order to that effect within a few days of his inauguration. Obama's reversal of the policy had been widely expected, and the main question was not if but when.

The New York Times Jan. 24 quoted Douglas Johnson, legislative director of the National Right to Life Committee, as describing the Obama order as "the first in an anticipated series of attacks on longstanding pro-life policies."

The Times also quoted Steven W. Sinding, a past director-general of the International Planned Parenthood Federation and population adviser to the World Bank as saying, "It is actually a great day for those who oppose abortion. This will help many of the most effective providers of family planning services to enable women to avoid unwanted pregnancies."

At issue is the Mexico City policy, which bars the U.S. Agency for International Development from granting any of its foreign aid funds for family planning and reproductive health to overseas non-governmental organizations that offer or advocate abortion as a form of family planning.

The USAID family planning and reproductive health budget for the fiscal year ending in September 2008 was just under \$392 million. In the current fiscal year it is \$461 million, said Douglas Johnson, legislative director of the National Right to Life Committee.

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The Mexico City policy -- so named because it was first announced by President Reagan during a United Nations population conference in Mexico City in 1984 -- bars any use of U.S. foreign aid for abortion or abortion-related services.

It further states that no U.S. foreign aid for other family planning and reproductive health causes can be given to organizations that also engage in abortion services, referrals or political advocacy, even if the aid requested is not directly for such activities.

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Chicago Cardinal Francis E. George, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, cautioned Obama against reversing the Mexico City policy in a Jan. 13 letter, in which he said that "efforts to force Americans to fund abortions with their tax dollars would pose a serious moral challenge."

In a second letter to Obama three days later he wrote that the Mexico City policy "has wrongly been attacked as a restriction on foreign aid for family planning" while in fact it ensures that family planning funds "are not diverted to organizations dedicated to performing and promoting abortions instead of reducing them."

"Once the clear line between family planning and abortion is erased, the idea of using family planning to reduce abortions becomes meaningless, and abortion tends to replace contraception as the means for reducing family size," Cardinal George said.

Several members of the U.S. Congress also recognized and protested Obama's likely rescission of the Mexico City policy in a Jan. 16 letter to the then-president-elect. The letter signed by 77 members -- described as bipartisan but consisting mostly of Republicans -- said that under the Mexico City policy, "Funding for family planning is not reduced by one penny. A policy against promoting abortions is only 'anti-family planning' if one assumes that abortion itself is a method of 'family planning.'"

In his Jan. 16 letter to Obama and members of Congress, released Jan. 19, Cardinal George said executive action "to reverse current policies against government-sponsored destruction of unborn human life" would be "a terrible mistake."

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He said the Mexico City policy ensures that U.S. taxpayers are not forced to make payments to "organizations dedicated to performing and promoting abortions instead of reducing them."

At a press briefing on abortion and other life issues Jan. 22, Richard Doerflinger, associate director of the USCCB Office of Pro-Life Activities, noted that the new president and many members of Congress who support keeping abortion legal have also said they will seek to reduce the number of abortions by other means. "We're going to hold Congress and the president accountable" to that, he said.

On the Mexico City policy he said, "If the agenda is to reduce abortions, you don't give your money to organizations that perform abortions. That's like saying you're going to fight cancer by giving money for cancer research to the tobacco companies."

Johnson, of the NRLC, said that before the Mexico City policy was introduced, the USAID funding accounted for one-quarter of the International Planned Parenthood Foundation's budget. IPPF of London and its local members around the world were the main losers in the policy because they refused to give up abortion advocacy or the practice of abortion in countries where it is legal.

Susan A. Cohen, director of government affairs of the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a research organization that promotes family planning and population control, said that while the Mexico City policy involved no reduction in total USAID funding for family planning, it did lead to "regions and localities where services (formerly available) were unavailable. For those women in those places, it was little consolation that the aid went somewhere else.

She referenced to a 2006 article in the *Guttmacher Policy Review*, in which she reported that according to one study, "Sixteen developing countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East (which received aid under the Clinton administration) had lost their USAID supply of contraceptives as of 2002. ... In each case the local International Planned Parenthood Federation affiliate was the only recipient of USAID contraceptives, but refused to accept the U.S. gag rule."

Critics of the Mexico City policy sometimes refer to it disparagingly as a "global gag rule."

In her article Cohen also noted the significant role that USAID family planning funding plays. "USAID provides more than one-third of the total donor support for contraceptive commodities worldwide; UNFPA (United Nations Fund for Population Activities) provides roughly another third," she wrote.

Austin Ruse, president of the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute, said, "One thing that unites Americans is that taxpayer money should not go to abortion." He said he expected Obama to reverse the Mexico City policy quickly because "it's been a football between the Republicans and Democrats" for 25 years now.

Johnson said that while the government refers to the "family planning" as the purpose of the USAID funding, "we're talking about population control."

"The effect of funding groups that promote abortion as a population control effort is to increase the number of abortions," he said.

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