

Debate angers African women

By Mimi Mann
ASSOCIATED PRESS

CAIRO — Lilian Wambue thought she was coming to Cairo's population conference to talk about the plight of African women.

Instead, the Cameroonian gynecologist says angrily, the meeting is being monopolized by debate over the morality of abortion and other secondary issues.

"I have women dying in my arms almost every day," Dr. Wambue said. "They're not dying from abortions. They're dying from childbirth. I can't even save them from childbirth."

Similar complaints are frequently heard among thousands of grass-roots activists from non-governmental organizations attending the U.N. Conference on Population and Development.

Abortion and two other highly emotional issues — birth control and sex education for adolescents — have dominated debate.

The Vatican, pro-life Christian groups and some Muslims have catapulted their opposition into world headlines. For Dr. Wambue, all the fanfare is clouding real issues: social and economic conditions that keep masses of African women living in the Dark Ages.

Lydia Joachim came to Cairo from Tanzania. She also worries that women's basic needs are being overlooked because of the heated debate. "At times we can't deliver babies because there's no water in the clinics," she said.

Giving women some control over their destiny is a main conference theme. The proposed conference report talks about women's health, welfare and education and gender equality, but this "empowerment" talk is beyond Dr. Wambue's life in Cameroon.

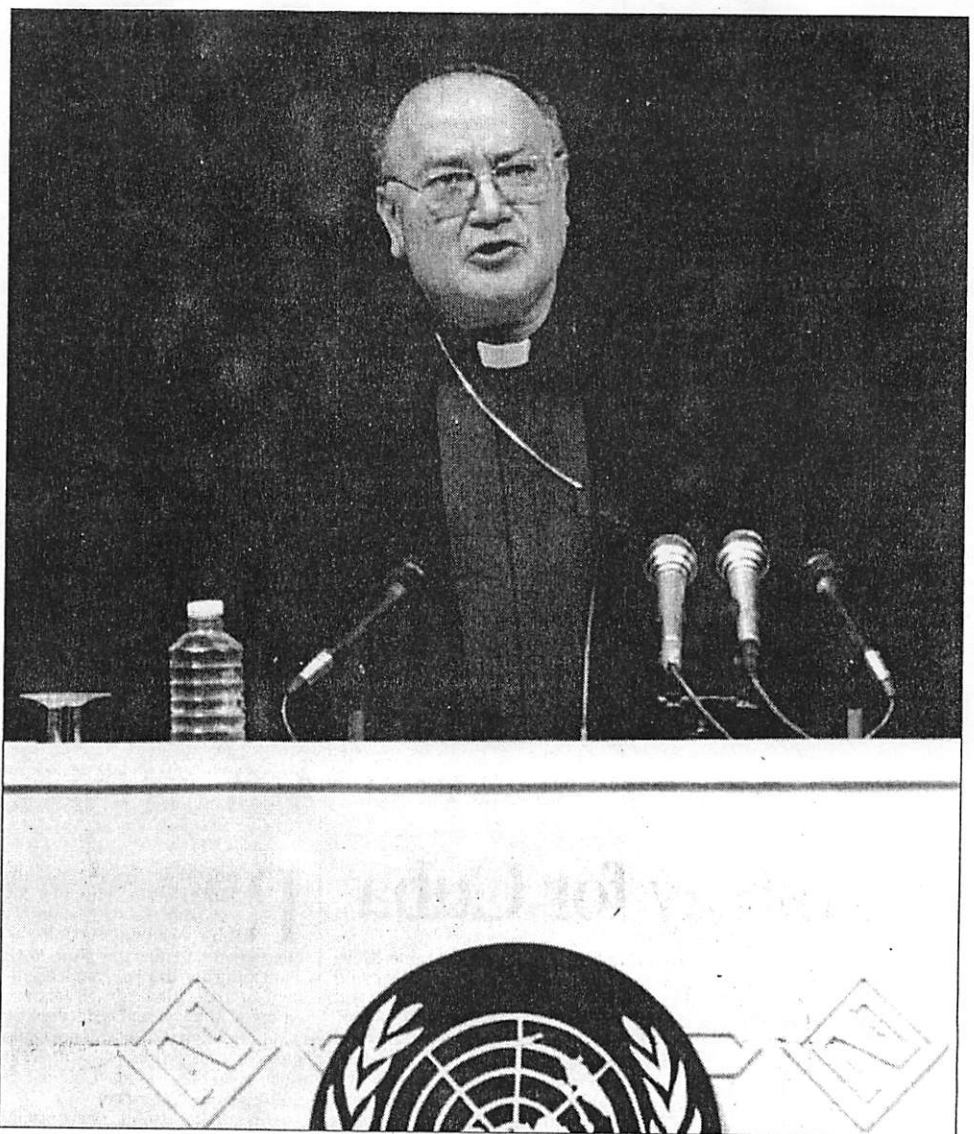
"Empowerment? This is a modern term. You can't imagine the women I see," she said. "They don't know anything. They come to me for answers. They bring them in dying from the countryside, and I can't save them."

Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of death for women of reproductive age in many poor countries.

In developed countries, a woman's chance of dying during pregnancy or childbirth is 1 in 10,000. In developing countries, it's 1 in 20.

Mrs. Joachim, whose group is called Community Development and Women's Affairs, knows firsthand the suffering of rural African women.

"Sometimes there are birth-control devices on the shelves when we don't have the medicine we need — medicine as simple as a headache remedy," Mrs. Joachim said.



Archbishop Renato Martino tells U.N. conferees the Vatican isn't going to budge on its stand against abortion.

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World countries opposed family planning with the slogan "Development is the best contraceptive." They argued that rich, healthy families decide to have fewer children.

In 1984, the poor countries decided that didn't work and asked for help in family planning, but the Reagan administration insisted that economic development was what was needed.

Now, said Mr. Daulaire, a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Agency for International Development who worked for 20 years as a doctor in the Third World, "we have built up knowledge by working in villages and know what works."

"This conference is coming up with solutions. All the [debates over abortion with the Vatican and with Muslims] will be forgotten in 30 days. The impact of the conference is this: the development of client-friendly services."

A spokesman for the U.N. Population Fund in New York said each country has a choice to endorse the final document, endorse it with reservations or decline to endorse.

"It is a nonbinding document

but becomes a statement of principle — an action guideline," the spokesman said. "There is a word of honor commitment by those who sign. The final document reflects current world thinking."

Said George Zeidenstein, former president of the Population Council: "The final document is going to have a big effect because it creates a situation in which governments make decisions — some move ahead and some lag behind but worldwide, those documents are referred to repeatedly."

"Billions of dollars will be spun in directions decided by this conference," which is expected to call for increasing spending on family planning activities to \$17 billion a year by 2000.

The 1984 U.N. population conference in Mexico City had the effect of cutting international aid for family planning.

The Reagan administration said it would "no longer provide funds to foreign organizations that performed or actively promoted abortion as a method of family planning," said Marty Dannenfelsler, an aide to Rep. Christopher H. Smith, New Jersey Republican.

Within two years, the Reagan administration cut all funding to the U.N. Fund for Population Activities and the International

Planned Parenthood Association.

But the Democratic Congress balked at the cuts and increased funding for family planning from \$240 million to \$290 million in 1985.

Indeed, Mr. Dannenfelsler said, the Mexico City policy "never resulted in reduction in funding. In the Reagan and Bush years, the U.S. provided about 45 percent of all international family planning assistance."

He said the main effect was to stop much of the lobbying activity by those groups attempting to overturn laws in other countries. Another Reagan administration policy was aimed at cutting aid for policies that force women to undergo abortions or sterilizations. It ended all aid to family planning in China, the world's most populous nation, which has severely coercive family planning practices.

U.S. aid for family planning since the Clinton administration took office has nearly doubled, from \$250 million in 1991 to \$392 million in 1994.

Some Third World critics of the conference have expressed fears that the final document will force countries to adopt certain policies on women's rights or abortion or risk the loss of foreign aid.