

Peru's plan to sterilize poor women criticized

Reports of deaths shock supporters

By CALVIN SIMS
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LIMA, Peru — For Magna Morales and Bernadina Alva, peasant Andean women who could barely afford to feed their families, it was a troubling offer but one they found hard to refuse. Shortly before Christmas, government health workers promised gifts of food and clothing if they underwent a sterilization procedure called tubal ligation.

The operation went well for Alva, 26, who received two dresses for her daughter and a T-shirt for her son. But Morales, 34, died of complications 10 days after the surgery, leaving three young children and a husband. She was never well enough to pick up the promised gifts, and the family was told it could not sue the government over her death because she had agreed to the procedure.

"When you don't have anything and they offer you clothes and food for your kids, then finally you agree to do it," said Alva, a neighbor of Morales in the village of Tocache. "Magna told them that her husband was against the idea, but they told her, 'Don't worry, we can do it right now, and tonight you will be back home cooking and your husband will never realize what happened.'"

TALES OF POOR women being pressured and even forced to submit to sterilization operations that have killed at least two women have emerged from small towns and villages across Peru in recent weeks.

Critics of the program, which was begun in 1995, charge that state health-care workers, in a hurry to meet government-imposed sterilization quotas that offer promotions and cash incentives, are taking advantage of poor rural women, many of whom are illiterate.

The critics, who include many of the program's early supporters, say health workers are not telling poor women about alternative methods of contraception or the fact that tubal ligation is nearly always irreversible. They also charge that many state doctors perform sloppy operations.

"They always look for the poorest women," said Gregoria Chuquihuanacas, another Tocache resident. "They make them put their fingerprint on a sterilization paper they don't understand because they can't read. If the women refuse, they threaten to cut off the food and milk programs."

The government denies there are sterilization quotas, though it acknowledges having goals.

"The government's program is morally corrupt because nurses and doctors are under pressure to find women to sterilize, and the women are not allowed to make an informed decision," said Luis Solari, a medical doctor who advises the Peruvian Episcopal Conference, which speaks for the country's Catholic bishops.

Catholic church leaders have vigorously opposed the program because it promotes artificial forms of birth control, which the church disavows. Cardinal Augusto Vargas Alzamora of Lima has warned Catholics that they will be committing a "grave sin" if they resort to sterilization.

THE GOVERNMENT has vehemently rejected charges that it is conducting a campaign to sterilize poor women and says that all its sterilization operations are done with the patient's consent, as required by law.

Health Ministry officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that in the last year the program had suffered from "lapses in judgment" by individual health-care workers and doctors, who had been reprimanded. But the officials said that such cases were isolated incidents that had been blown out of proportion.

Three years ago, when President Alberto Fujimori announced plans to promote birth control as a way to reduce family size and widespread poverty in Peru, family-planning experts, feminists and even many opposition politicians expressed broad support. But the mounting criticism of the sterilizations has tarnished the image of the family-planning program, one of the most ambitious in the Third World.

Health Ministry officials estimate that the 1997 sterilizations will result in 26,000 fewer births in 1998. This is good news, they say, in a country where the fertility rate — the average number of children born per woman — is 3.5, compared with 2 for the United States.