

WORLD

U.N.: Lack of contraceptives gives birth to many woes

By Betsy Pisik
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Due to a lack of family planning, more than half of the world's 175 million pregnancies each year are unwanted and 45 million of them end in abortions, a U.N. agency said yesterday.

In addition, as many as 200,000 women die each year because they lack access to contraceptive services or because those methods fail. Some 70,000 of those women die because of unsafe abortions, according to "The State of the World's Population," an annual survey by the U.N. Population Fund released yesterday.

Many of the complications and almost all of the fatalities occur in developing countries.

"For many women, denial of sexual and reproductive rights is a matter of life and death," the fund's executive director, Dr. Nafis Sadik, said yesterday at a London news conference. She called the situation a "massive denial of human rights" and called for greater gender equality and better enforcement of laws protecting women's rights.

At least 585,000 women — one every minute — die each year from causes related to pregnancy, according to the report.

That does not include the number of women who suffer disability as a result of childbirth.

Despite promises by 180 countries at the 1994 U.N. Conference on Population in Cairo, millions of women are still denied the right to

choose whether or when to have children, according to the report, which listed the numbers of forced marriages and pregnancies, rape, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, coerced commercial sex, and, in China, mandatory contraception or abortion.

"You know and expect all these problems exist," said population fund spokesman Stirling D. Scruggs, who presented the report yesterday in Washington. "But when you look at the research, it overwhelms you."

Among the findings:

- Roughly 120 million African and Arab women have undergone female genital mutilation, and another 2 million women face the procedure each year.

- Fourteen countries still re-

quire a husband to approve any contraceptive services for his wife, while 60 others require a husband's permission for permanent contraceptive methods.

- More than 3 million people — six each minute — were infected by HIV, the virus the causes AIDS, in 1996. At least half of the new cases of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, are among men and women under the age of 20.

- The United States has the highest rate of teen-age and adolescent pregnancies of any developed nation.

- Japan has banned the use of oral contraceptives and copper IUDs because of concern that their use will reduce the use of condoms, which can inhibit the spread

of sexually transmitted diseases.

At the Cairo conference, 180 nations agreed in principle that their populaces should have access to reproductive health information by 2015.

Providing adequate reproductive health care worldwide would cost about \$17 billion a year, according to the report, which says that only about half that amount is now available. One-third of that is to come from donor nations, who, Mr. Scruggs said, are falling behind in their responsibilities.

The report's authors did find some bright spots, such as a decline in the birthrate. The world's population is 5.85 billion and is expected to reach 9.4 billion by 2025. This is down from an earlier estimate of 10 billion.