

WORLD

U.S. softens approach to population conference

By Duncan Murrell
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Under increasing attack by the Vatican and fundamentalist Muslims, the United States yesterday struck a conciliatory tone on abortion and other controversial issues clouding next week's population conference in Cairo.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Timothy Wirth, President Clinton's No. 2 man to the conference that begins Monday, said the United States was not seeking universal adoption of abortion as a "right" but supported the notion of "access to the full range of reproductive health care services."

Mr. Wirth sought to clarify an October statement in which he had said the United States believes "access to safe, legal, and voluntary abortion is a fundamental right of all women."

"We were talking about access, and other people thought it was a capital 'R,' a universal human right," Mr. Wirth said at a State Department briefing for reporters yesterday.

"It was a matter of just sort of not understanding what kind of perception there would be of that language."

The Vatican has vehemently opposed the notion of abortion as a right and has attacked language in the U.N.'s proposed program of action on population.

One particularly controversial portion of the population document says men and women should have "access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of fertility regulation of their choice."

The Vatican has said such language is tantamount to allowing abortion on demand.

Other groups have opposed the U.N. program because of perceptions that it was insensitive to differing cultures and societies worldwide.

The Muslim World League, a nongovernmental Muslim advocacy group based in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, has said the document was "seeking to impose a unilateral point of view on the developing countries."

The MWL argued that the population document violated shariah (Islamic law) by "allowing free abortion, condoning premarital sexual relations and encouraging adolescent sexuality."

Mr. Wirth countered these criticisms, arguing that the United States has always supported population reform through the cultural and legal mechanisms inherent to each country.

"The U.N. has no right or authority to impose anything on any country," he said.

He pointed out that the United States and Colombia had both proposed this spring that abortion be dealt with as part of the entire reproductive services package.

"We have said very clearly that reproductive health care services would be made available in any country based upon the framework of law, culture and religion existing in that country."

Other critics have been fearful that future U.S. aid commitments would be tied to a country's adherence to the principles adopted by the Cairo conference.

"Absolutely not," a spokesman

The Cairo talks: Objectives, procedures and basic text

CAIRO (Reuters) — The U.N. Conference on Population and Development opening in Cairo on Monday has aroused passions among religious conservatives.

Here, in question-and-answer form, is a guide to the conference, its objectives, the mechanics of it and the current state of the central document that the 20,000 delegates will discuss.

Q: What is the purpose of the Cairo conference?

A: The aim is to reach international consensus on a 20-year "program of action" that would hold world population to 7.27 billion people in the year 2015 and 7.8 billion in 2050, from 5.66 billion this year. The program includes birth control, the status of women, education, sexually transmitted diseases, health care, population distribution and migration.

Q: Will the program of action be a treaty?

A: No, the program will not be binding.

Q: Why did the United Nations choose Cairo?

A: Egypt lobbied to act as host

and was chosen partly for the success of its own family planning program and partly because it still has a serious population problem.

Q: What will happen at the conference?

A: From Sept. 5 to 13 the delegates will complete the draft prepared in New York in April. A parallel conference of hundreds of non-governmental organizations will meet nearby.

Q: Why has the draft aroused such passions among religious groups?

A: The document tries to please all parties. It does not endorse any specific model for the family or set norms for sexual behavior. It recognizes that laws and customs differ from one country to another. Some religious conservatives, especially in the Muslim and Roman Catholic camps, find this broad-mindedness difficult to swallow and would like the document to reflect their own definitions.

Q: What does the draft program say about birth control?

A: The document strongly en-

dorses making contraceptives and contraceptive advice available to those who want them. In no way does it encourage governments to stop couples having children.

Q: What does it say about abortion?

A: The two proposed texts hold that governments should deal "openly and forthrightly" with unsafe abortions and should provide health care for complications from unsafe abortions. One advocates efforts to reduce the rate of abortion, the other says abortion should not be promoted as a means of family planning.

Q: What does it say about homosexuality?

A: The document says nothing about homosexuality. One section refers to "marriages, other unions and the family," another to "sexually active unmarried individuals."

Q: What does it say about adolescent sex and sex education?

A: It advocates providing adolescents with confidential advice on sexual matters and promoting "responsible and healthy sexual

and reproductive behavior, including voluntary abstinence."

Q: What does it say about the role of women?

A: The document strongly favors empowering women to participate fully in all the decisions affecting their lives. It calls for legal equality for women and an end to all forms of discrimination.

Q: Who is against the conference and the program of action?

A: The main opponents are the Vatican and a broad alliance of Muslims as well as some right-wing Christian groups in the United States. Other major religions, such as Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism, have not taken a position against it.

Q: Who supports it?

A: The document is the result of a consensus at the New York meeting in April at which most U.N. member states were represented. Its most active advocates, however, are secular liberals, female activists and Third World countries other than those with governments dominated by Muslims or Catholics.

for the State Department said yesterday, quoting Vice President Al Gore's statement last week that such allegations were "unambiguously and absolutely wrong."

Mr. Wirth acknowledged that there were other areas of conflict that were unresolved going into

the Cairo conference, but he predicted they would be worked out shortly.

Chief among these was language advocating teen-age access to family planning services and the wide range of reproductive health services available.

"On just about everything, we're in agreement with the Vatican: on family language, on first aid, on the education of girls, on the environment, on the development section," Mr. Wirth said.

He noted that more than 92 percent of the population document

has already been approved going into the Cairo conference, in contrast to the Rio conference on the environment that began with only 50 percent of the environment document approved.

• This article is based in part on wire service reports.