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U.S. to help U.N. redefine 'families'

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The Bush administration has joined European delegates to an upcoming U.N. summit on children in moving to recognize families "in various forms," including unmarried cohabiting couples and homosexual partners.

A coalition of Catholic and Muslim countries has formed to block the change to the traditional U.N. definition of the family — married heterosexual parents and children — at the General Assembly's Special Session on Children from May 8 to May 10.

A senior official at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in New York said the U.S. Mission and the State Department are backing the delegates from Switzerland and the European Union in their efforts because so many children today are brought up by single parents.

Informal negotiations resume today in New York on a final document for the summit.

The U.S. official spoke anonymously, saying he did not want to be "hung out to dry" for explaining the administration's position. He said the United States supports the proposal to recognize families "in various forms" because "obviously we feel this more reflects the families of today, which are headed by single parents and extended families."

Customarily, U.N. members are obliged to conform their national laws to the body's declarations, and critics have said that the European-backed changes would make such proposals as homosexual "marriage" and domestic-partner benefits an internationally recognized right.

A U.N. publication following up the 1994 U.N. population conference in Copenhagen indicated that many radical participants believed altering U.N. language in this way would grant international legitimacy to such

arrangements.

The U.S.-backed European moves will produce "a donnybrook," said Austin Ruse, who heads the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute, located in an office building next to U.N. headquarters in New York.

In the event of an impasse, Mr. Ruse said, U.N. members would probably go to a "default position" proposed by South Korean delegates, which states that "in different social and political systems, various forms of the family exist."

Mr. Ruse said the South Korean position would not impose an obligation on U.N. members to change their laws.

"I don't know what the United States is doing," said Monsignor James Reinert, negotiator for the Vatican's delegation at the United Nations.

The world community's traditional definition of family has remained unchanged since the 1994 Copenhagen conference, Monsignor Reinert said, despite efforts of feminist and pro-homosexual forces to achieve a permissive definition to give global legitimacy to nonmarital lifestyles.

"There won't be a compromise on this paragraph. There just won't be," the Holy See's negotiator said in an interview. "Too many people feel too strongly about this."

The U.S. official with the U.N. Mission said the change is not likely to help legitimize homosexual unions, despite the Copenhagen writings.

"I would reject that definition that some individual person writing for the U.N. would include in a publication that was not embraced by all member states," the official said.

However, Maria Sophia Aguirre, a population and development expert at Catholic University of America who follows U.N. programs and issues, disagreed.

She said the United Nations' compilation of Copenhagen papers, published in 1996 and titled "Family Challenges for the Future," listed three groups of families: "nuclear," "extended" and "reorganized."

"'Nuclear' includes biological, social, one-parent, adoptive or in vitro families," she said. "'Extended' includes three-generation, kinship, tribal and polygamous. 'Reorganized' includes remarried, community living, same-gender," terms that she said would collectively encompass cohabitation and homosexual couples.

African countries promoted language for the child summit document to further the concept of extended families, the Catholic University researcher said.

"Extended families, cousins and tribes, is an important concept in Africa. But what [the U.N. bureaucracy] really means by 'various forms of families' is something else. Some African countries are now uneasy," she said.

The White House, during the past week, has refused to comment in response to questions from The Washington Times.

Congressional reaction also was cautious, with about a dozen Republican House and Senate leaders and senior aides saying they wanted to see complete details of the Bush administration position before commenting publicly.

"I'd like to take a look at it," said Rep. J.C. Watts Jr. of Oklahoma, chairman of the House Republican Conference.

"We need to speak very clearly when it comes to the family," Mr. Watts said. "I would love to have a mom and a dad in every household. But if you don't have a dad, it doesn't mean mom loves the child any less."

But Mr. Watts bristled at suggestions of a U.N. position that might legitimize single-parent, unmarried or homosexual households in the context of children.

Despite difficulties with much of the Arab world over the war on Muslim-backed terrorism, the administration's staunchest allies in the U.N. negotiations have been Muslim nations affiliated with the 17-nation Some Developing Countries Group, sources said.

The U.S. delegation supports a proposal by Sudan for moral sex education that promotes abstinence, the sources said. Muslim countries circulated their own position paper stating that "sex education should emphasize hygiene and chastity."

The European delegates are acting contrary to the will of the democratically elected European Parliament, which on April 11 debated and resoundingly defeated a resolution on the redefinition of family being pushed by their representatives at U.N. conferences.

In another contentious matter, the Bush administration has a tentative agreement to remove language from the child summit document that would support abortion counseling and abortions for teens under guarantees of so-called "reproductive health services," a State Department source said last week.

Last June, a senior Canadian negotiator told delegates at a U.N. preparatory meeting for the child summit that abortion services were included in the draft document's three references to "reproductive health services."

The State Department responded with cables to all U.S. ambassadors instructing them to lobby for removal of the pro-abortion language.

In prior U.N. documents after population and women's conferences, abortion has been listed and promoted as an option among "reproductive health services," Mrs. Aguirre said.

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