

UN Human Rights Council Challenges US Abortion Ban on Humanitarian Assistance

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GENEVA - Today, during the 2nd Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the United States, several UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) Member States directly challenged the abortion restrictions that the U.S. imposes on its foreign aid.

“The list of countries calling on the United States to lift its abortion ban on foreign aid is growing,” said Global Justice Center (GJC) President Janet Benshoof. “The U.S. can no longer ignore or deflect its duty to change a decades-long policy that denies women and girls raped in war their rights under the Geneva Conventions.”

The UN Human Rights Council monitors the human rights records of the 192 UN member states. Every four years, member states are required to sit for a Universal Periodic Review, during which each country receives recommendations on how to comply with their human rights obligations.

In a September 2014 [submission to the UNHRC](#) GJC asserted that U.S. abortion restrictions on humanitarian aid are incompatible with U.S. obligations under the Geneva Conventions, the Convention against Torture and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These restrictions, including the Helms Amendment, ban the use of any U.S. foreign aid funds by grantees to perform or even discuss abortion services. This includes humanitarian aid to war zones and results in the denial of abortion services to women and girls raped in armed conflict in violation of their rights.

The need for such services is demonstrated daily in conflict zones, as was seen last week when it was discovered that one-third of those rescued from the clutches of Boko Haram – 214 women and children - were pregnant, [according to a report from the United Nations Population Fund](#).

The importance of access to safe abortion services as a matter of right for girls and women raped in war has been increasingly recognized, including by the UN Security Council, the UN Secretary-General and other countries. International concern over the role of the U.S. in the denial of essential medical care to girls and women raped in war has resulted in countries including the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Belgium, Norway and France [recommending during today's UPR](#) that the United States government take steps to limit the impact of these restrictions and ensure access to safe abortions for rape victims in conflict zones.

In addition to these oral recommendations during the review, Norway, the UK, Netherlands and Switzerland all submitted written questions in advance, asking the US to examine its abortion-related restrictions on foreign aid, if the US was considering removing these restriction and if not, for what justification.

It is now up to the Obama Administration to act. The Administration has three months to formally respond to these recommendations. “President Obama has not only the ability, but also the duty, to act to rectify these violations of U.S. obligations under international law,” said Benshoof.

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