

Obama signs order reversing abortion-funds policy

WASHINGTON – President Barack Obama on Friday quietly ended the Bush administration's ban on giving federal money to international groups that perform abortions or provide information on the option. Liberal groups welcomed the decision, while abortion rights foes criticized the president.

Known as the "Mexico City policy," the ban has been reinstated and then reversed by Republican and Democratic presidents since Ronald Reagan established it in 1984. Democrat Bill Clinton ended the ban in 1993, but Republican George W. Bush re-instituted it in 2001 as one of his first acts in office.

A White House spokesman, Bill Burton, said Obama signed an executive order on the ban, without coverage by the media, late Friday afternoon. That was in contrast to the midday signings with fanfare of executive orders on other subjects earlier in the week.

Obama's action came one day after the 36th anniversary of the Supreme Court's landmark Roe v. Wade ruling that legalized abortion.

The Bush policy had banned U.S. taxpayer money, usually in the form of Agency for International Development funds, from going to international family planning groups that either offer abortions or provide information, counseling or referrals about abortion. The rule also had prohibited federal funding for groups that lobby to legalize abortion or promote it as a family planning method.

Both Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who will oversee foreign aid, had promised to do away with the rule during the presidential campaign. Clinton visited the U.S. Agency for International Development on Friday but made no mention of the step.

Obama has spent his first days in office aggressively signing executive orders reversing Bush administration policies on issues ranging from foreign policy to government operations. TV cameras were invited in for Wednesday's announcements on ethics rules and for Thursday's signing of orders on closing the Guantanamo Bay prison camp and banning torture in the questioning of terror suspects.

In a move related to the lifting of the abortion rule, Obama also is expected to restore funding to the U.N. Population Fund (UNFPA), probably in the next budget. Both he and Clinton had pledged to reverse a Bush administration determination that assistance to the organization violated U.S. law.

The Bush administration had barred U.S. money from the fund, contending that its work in China supported a Chinese family planning policy of coercive abortion and involuntary sterilization. UNFPA has vehemently denied that it does.

Organizations that had pressed Obama to make the abortion-ban change were jubilant.

"Women's health has been severely impacted by the cutoff of assistance. President Obama's actions will help reduce the number of unintended pregnancies, abortions and women dying from high-risk pregnancies because they don't have access to family planning," said Tod Preston, a spokesman for Population Action International, an advocacy group.

Anti-abortion groups criticized the move.

"President Obama not long ago told the American people that he would support policies to reduce abortions, but today he is effectively guaranteeing more abortions by funding groups that promote abortion as a method of population control," said Douglas Johnson, legislative director of the National Right to Life Committee.

Obama also is expected at some point to lift or ease restrictions on federal money for stem cell research, an issue that divides people along similar battle lines, but there was no word about any action on that Friday. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has expressed interest in pressing legislation on stem cells in the first 100 days of the new Congress if the new administration doesn't act.

Some scientists want broader use of embryonic stem cells than is currently allowed, hoping for new treatments for many diseases. Obtaining stem cells from four- or five-day-old embryos kills the embryos, and many opponents see that as taking life.

http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090123/ap_on_go_pr_wh/obama_abortion_ban