

Nicaragua's abortion ban puts women at risk, rights group says

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MANAGUA --

Nicaragua's recent ban on all abortions puts women's lives at risk because doctors are now unwilling to perform even legal health services and women are too afraid to seek them, a U.S. human rights group said Tuesday.

"This new law intentionally denies women access to health services essential to saving their lives," New York-based Human Right Watch said in a report released Tuesday.

The law, approved in November, bans abortion to save the mother's life, the only circumstance under which the procedure was previously allowed in Nicaragua. Before the new law, women in Nicaragua could receive a so-called therapeutic abortion if three doctors certified that their health was at risk.

In December, the Ministry of Health issued mandatory guidelines on still-legal treatments for women with obstetric emergencies. But it has failed to ensure medical care is offered, the group said.

A spokeswoman for the Ministry of Health, Maritza Cuan, refused to comment on the report.

Human Rights Watch said the law has not only stopped abortions, it also prevents frightened women from seeking help for pregnancy-related complications.

"Women and girls are afraid they will be accused of having induced an abortion," it said.

It also said that doctors fear they might be targeted for prosecution under the abortion ban.

"Doctors in Nicaragua are now afraid to provide even legal health services to pregnant women," said Angela Heimbürger, Americas researcher at Human Rights Watch's Women's Rights Division. "Some testified that personnel at public hospitals refused women and girls adequate care after devastating miscarriages, with direct reference to the ban."

The group wasn't able to document any cases of doctors or others who have been accused of performing abortions, but it said prosecutions appeared to be rare.

Heimbürger said Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega has not studied the health effects of the abortion ban and has refused to take action against doctors who have denied women legal healthcare.

"President Ortega should immediately help mitigate the disastrous effects of this ban by prioritizing pregnant women's access to emergency medical care," Heimburger said.

"Nicaragua's president needs to reassure women they will not be punished for trying to stay alive."

Dr. Leonel Arguello, president of the Nicaraguan Society of General Medicine, said 82 women have died because of pregnancy complications between Jan. 1 and Sept. 15. He said six of those deaths could have been prevented -- including one involving an ectopic pregnancy, in which a fetus forms outside the uterus.

But Dr. Rafael Cabrera of the Nicaraguan Pro-Life Association said medical advances have eliminated the need for therapeutic abortion.

"The diseases that justified [therapeutic abortion] now have medical solutions," he said.

The new law has been criticized by women's rights groups around the world.

On Sunday, members of the Nicaraguan Feminist Movement interrupted Mass at the capital's Metropolitan Cathedral to protest the ban on abortion.

"We want to highlight that women whose lives are in danger while pregnant also have rights," said Rosa Capella, who was among the protesters.

Wendy Flores, a lawyer for the Nicaraguan Human Rights Center, said she has asked the Supreme Court to declare the new law unconstitutional because it puts the lives of women at risk. But she said the court has so far ignored her request.