

# Amnesty International backs access to abortion

WASHINGTON – The International Executive Committee of Amnesty International has declared that a woman should have full, legal access to abortion in cases of rape or incest or if her life or health is at grave risk. The new policy calls for eliminating criminal penalties for anyone who provides an abortion or obtains one.

Last fall, when Amnesty was considering such a policy, the head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops warned that the human rights advocacy group would risk its “well-deserved moral credibility” if it abandoned its neutral stance on abortion.

“To abandon this long-held position would be a tragic mistake, dividing human rights advocates and diverting Amnesty International from its central and urgent mission of defending human rights as outlined in the U.N.

Declaration of Human Rights,” wrote the USCCB president, Bishop William S. Skylstad of Spokane, Wash., in a letter last September to the organization’s secretary-general, Irene Khan.

In a background paper on its position, sent to Catholic News Service May 10 following a CNS request, Amnesty described its new policy of support for access to abortion in some circumstances as “part of its campaign to Stop Violence Against Women.”

The International Executive Committee adopted the policy in April, but information did not begin to circulate widely until early May, after a member copied documents about the policy from Amnesty’s members-only Web site and posted them publicly on the Web.

A cover letter from Karen Schneider, chairwoman of Amnesty’s Sexual and Reproductive Rights Working Group, dated April 20, said: “This policy will not be made public at this time. ... No section or structure (of the Amnesty network) is to issue a press release or public statement or external communication of any kind on

the policy decision.”

Amnesty leaders were asked to release the background paper only in response to inquiries. A letter from Larry Cox, executive director of Amnesty International USA, is intended only for release to those who express concern about the new policy.

Another document in the packet is a letter that any local Amnesty leader could sign, for use as a letter to a newspaper “as a response to articles, editorials or letters to the editor that are critical of the new sexual and reproductive rights policy,” Schneider wrote. “It is not to be sent proactively,” she added.

The last document in the packet is an eight-page “frequently asked questions” paper, intended for internal use only, providing talking points for responding to various questions that might be raised about the policy.

Amnesty International USA spokeswoman Suzanne Trimel confirmed the authenticity of those documents, which explain the movement’s position in detail.

The “frequently asked questions” paper, for example, points out that Amnesty International “has long opposed forced abortion, sterilization and contraception in all circumstances” and “opposes sex-selective abortion.”

It says that the new policy “does not address disability-selective abortions, which raise complicated issues of fact and are widely debated among advocates for the rights of persons with disabilities.”

“AI recognizes that some state regulation of access to abortion is justifiable,” it says. “For example, states may properly ensure that medical practitioners are licensed, may provide other protection against malpractice and may set reasonable gestational limits.”

“AI does not counsel individuals as to whether they should continue or terminate a pregnancy, nor will AI campaign generally for abortion,” it says. It adds, however, that the new policy “allows AI to call governments to account for their laws and policies on abortion and to make appropriate policy recommendations toward the realization of women’s human rights.”

Addressing the U.S. Supreme Court’s recent decision upholding the federal Partial

Birth Abortion Ban Act, it says that because of Amnesty's opposition to "criminal sanctions for women and their (abortion) providers," it opposes the provision of the law "that imposes fines and up to two years in prison for doctors who perform particular types of abortions."

Although the policy expresses support for access to abortion only in cases of rape or incest or for grave risks to life or health, the "frequently asked questions" paper says Amnesty supports decriminalization in all cases because rape victims "face daunting and sometimes insurmountable challenges" if they must prove rape in order to obtain an abortion.

"Rape survivors may be unwilling or unable to meet access requirements ... within the window of time in which abortion is legally accessible," it says.

The USCCB and Amnesty have collaborated on a number of issues, including campaigns against the death penalty and the use of torture on detainees.