

WORLD & NATION

Vatican criticizes focus of U.N. women's paper

By Tracy Early
Catholic News Service

UNITED NATIONS (CNS) — The Vatican said that the U.N. conference reviewing progress since the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women produced a document that, like the Beijing Platform for Action, gave undue emphasis to the single issue of sexual and reproductive health.

That issue was emphasized "to the detriment of a holistic view of the health of women and their families," the Vatican said.

The statement of the Vatican's U.N. mission was delivered by Kathryn Hauwa Hoomkwap, a Nigerian who also served on the Vatican delegation to the Beijing Conference.

She presented the statement June 9, the final day of a weeklong special session of the U.N. General Assembly reviewing results of Beijing and using the theme, "Women 2000: Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-first Century."

Tying the Vatican message to the pope's appeal to "be not afraid," Hoomkwap said that she "as a wife and mother," along with "many of my sisters throughout the world," feared the effects that disease, malnutrition, war and illiteracy would have on women and their families.

Because of this concern, she said, the Vatican delegation "strongly supports" sections of the document produced at the special session "condemning all forms of violence against women," "upholding women's rights to economic and political empowerment" and calling for action against poverty and high mortality rates

among girls and women.

"For all of us to cease to be afraid, we must proceed with full and complete human development — not only social and economic but also spiritual," she said.

Hoomkwap noted that the Vatican had "participated actively in the negotiations" of the special session, and considered issues raised at Beijing and in the review "of critical importance to the lives of millions of women worldwide," she said.

In the Vatican view, she said, the "living heart" of the Beijing Platform for Action lay in the discussion of needs that "correspond to the multiplicity of services the Catholic Church has historically provided to women."

These services demonstrate in actions as well as words that the Catholic Church believes in giving women the education and other assistance "they need to pursue their own life and family goals," Hoomkwap said.

In U.N. meetings such as the Beijing Conference and the Beijing +5 review, the Vatican has characteristically fought to get as much acceptable language as possible on matters it considered most vital, and then accepted the compromise results with reservations.

Some U.N. officials have interpreted its approach as an indication of a shift in Vatican positions on some of its traditional views, such as birth control. But Hoomkwap disputed such interpretations.

"Nothing that the Holy See has done in the 'Women 2000' process should be understood as an endorsement of concepts it does not support for moral reasons," she emphasized.

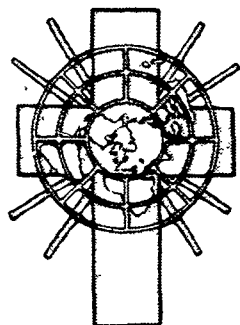


CNS/Reuters

Assad mourners

Syrian youths in Damascus carry a picture of Syrian President Hafez Assad while mourning his death June 11. The president's death leaves open questions about Syrian internal stability and prospects for peace with Israel.

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George

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contrary to Catholic teaching.

Cardinal George noted that much of the supporting documentation for the resolution came from Catholics for a Free Choice.

"This is a group with no medical expertise," he said. "This is a group with no affiliation with the Catholic Church, except as an adversary. ... I urge the American Medical Association not to join this campaign against religious freedom."

In written testimony, CHA called Resolution 218 "a thinly veiled attack on the right of Catholic health care organizations to provide health care services in a manner that is consistent with their religious and ethical beliefs."

"If adopted, the resolution — or any component — would put the AMA on record as supporting the power of the federal and state governments to compel health care organizations to engage in activities that violate their consciences," the testimony added.

"Though we recognize that in a pluralistic society there is debate on the Catholic Church's positions on abortion and contraception, the resolution before the AMA would start this nation down a perilous track for American medicine if we were to invite the federal and state governments to compel health care facilities to do what in conscience they cannot do," it said.

The CHA noted that U.S. health care providers currently have the right to decide against providing certain medical services because of economic considerations.

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