Officials Fired for Promoting Emergency Contraception

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A Chilean federal health official was fired on International Women's Day when the press reported that he had been working to expand access to emergency contraception. President Ricardo Lagos demanded undersecretary of health Antonio Infante's resignation when daily newspaper El Mercurio published a Health Ministry document outlining circumstances in which it would be permissible for women to receive the morning-after pill from public health clinics around the country.

Right-wingers in the Congress have since been demanding the resignation of Health Secretary Pedro Garcia, though Garcia, Infante's superior, has called that demand "absurd."

Morning-after pill under fire, but gaining popularity

The Lagos government endorsed distribution of the pill in cases of rape at basic health clinics last May, leading to court battles and church opposition (see NotiSur, 2004-05-21). The measure is one step the government has taken to increase Chilean citizen's control over their marital and reproductive lives, along with others like the passage of Chile's first divorce law in more than a century of lawmaking, a law against sexual harassment in the workplace that took 13 years to pass, and a proposed comprehensive anti-discrimination law to be considered this month that seeks to limit discrimination based on sexual orientation.

On March 2, Infante's head rolled, after a Feb. 10 document became public showing that Infante's staff was setting up distribution protocols for the morning-after pill, which is to be taken within 72 hours after a woman has had unprotected sex or in cases where other contraception methods have failed. The document listed circumstances when the product Postinor-2 (Lovonorgestre) could be given out, including failure of various other types of contraception or, in the case of rape, if the woman was not using a contraceptive device." The document stated in bold letters that, "It should only be used as an emergency method and not in a regular manner." Women would receive the medication along with counseling that it is not for regular use.

Since these criteria went beyond the "only in case of rape" standard that President Lagos had set by allowing women who requested the pill to have access to it, Lagos called on Infante to resign. "Yesterday we were sent an embarrassing mistake," said Lagos the next day. He stood behind Health Minister Garcia, who reportedly disagreed with Infante's actions.

Deputies like Guido Girardi, Enrique Accorsi, and Fulvio Rossi were demanding Garcia's resignation days later, which split elements of Lagos' ruling Concertacion alliance in the legislature.
The controversy has done little to minimize the medication's popularity, with Chilean sales of Postinor-2 going up 80% between 2002 and 2004. Sales rose from 10,000 between January 2002 and January 2003 to 18,000 last year.

**Presidential candidates generally agree**

After Infante resigned, presidential candidates scurried, to varying degrees, to repudiate greater access to emergency contraception. Partido Democrata Cristiano (PDC) candidate Soledad Alvear said she shared Lagos' decision to ask Infante to resign "100%." "I agree that the pill should only be available in exceptional cases, in rapes," said the recently resigned foreign minister whom the president recently endorsed during a television interview and who is currently polling as the front-runner. "The decision of the government is correct, I don't agree in broadening access beyond what the government has resolved."

Michelle Bachelet, who will represent the Partido Socialista-Partido por la Democracia (PS-PPD) coalition in December's election and who is running second in polls, said that there has not yet been adequate debate within the country on the pill. "The morning-after pill is for emergency contraception. For that reason, the Health Ministry has pointed out that it is not a method for regular contraception, it doesn't have that purpose, nor is it successful for that," said Bachelet. "I think there needs to be a basic debate that society has not yet held, which has been held at the level of certain opinion makers, but I think it's an issue we must face as a society."

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Regarding the decision to ask Infante to step down, Bachelet would not comment, saying it was the president's responsibility. Former Santiago mayor and Alianza por Chile candidate Joaquin Lavin, trailing the two other candidates in opinion polls, said that the drug should not be given out "excessively" and called on women to carry to term pregnancies resulting from rape. "For me, frankly, I don't like that a drug, which still has scientific disagreements about what effects it produces and which can be abortive, can be given out excessively. And it makes me happy that this has been rectified, and I share the final position of the government," said Lavin. Lavin, a member of the ultra-conservative Catholic group Opus Dei, emphasized that he didn't accept arguments for distribution of the pill, even in case of rape. "Women who have been raped must be welcomed and given all the support so that the child may live," said Lavin.

Church fights pill, moves to decriminalize abortion regionally

Throughout the region, the Catholic Church has bent the ear of municipal and national governments, making its views on reproductive freedom well-known. In January, the mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, suspended distribution of the morning-after pill in response to Catholic pressure. The archdiocese had described the pill as abortive. Mayor Cesa Maia, of the opposition party Partido del Frente Liberal (PFL), has his eyes on the 2006 presidential election.

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Some Brazilian Catholics have vowed to oppose the re-election of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva if he allows public health clinics to broaden access to abortion. Rafael Cifuentes, a bishop of Mexican origin and head of the Comissao Episcopal para a Vida e a Familia, said there was a possibility that there would be Catholic opposition to Lula in 2006 if he authorized the public health network to broaden the implementation of abortions.

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