

Bush Bars UNFPA Funding, Bucking Recommendation of Its Own Investigators

Handing a major political victory to anti-birth control groups and their congressional champions led by Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ), the Bush administration officially announced on July 21 it was cutting off all U.S. support for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Earlier, the administration itself had asked Congress to approve \$25 million in its FY 2002 budget, with Secretary of State Colin L. Powell telling Congress that UNFPA “does invaluable work through its programs in maternal and child health care, voluntary family planning, screening for reproductive tract cancers, breast-feeding promotion, and HIV/AIDS prevention.” In December 2001, Congress had endorsed funding at \$34 million.

Nonetheless, Smith and his supporters—with the blessing of House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-IL), Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-TX) and Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-TX)—applied steady pressure on the administration to defund UNFPA entirely, citing the 1985 “Kemp-Kasten” amendment making funding contingent on an annual determination by the president that UNFPA does not “support or participate in the management of a program of coercive abortion or involuntary sterilization.” By having a program in China at all, they argued, UNFPA was supporting China’s strict population-control policies, which are widely acknowledged to result in coercive practices on the ground.

UNFPA’s supporters argued just the opposite, that UNFPA’s program in China constituted a model for the Chinese government of how to provide family planning services on a voluntary basis and the positive

impact of doing so. Indeed, an investigative team of British parliamentarians unanimously concluded in April that “the UNFPA program [in China] is a force for good.”

In May, a three-member U.S. team, handpicked by the White House, was dispatched to China to see for itself. Although the contents of its report to Powell were kept secret for two months after its return, the team had recommended on May 29 that the \$34 million approved by Congress should be released, stating that they found “no evidence” that UNFPA is in violation of the Kemp-Kasten provision.

Nevertheless, the president determined otherwise, and he instructed Powell to notify Congress that the administration would be redirecting the \$34 million to the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID) reproductive health program. Powell’s letter to Congress deems UNFPA guilty by its association with the Chinese government. The case rests on the fact that of the \$5 million (in non-U.S. funds) UNFPA spends in China, UNFPA provides about \$200,000 to the Chinese State Family Planning Commission (SFPC). It is the SFPC that imposes “social compensation fees” upon Chinese couples that exceed their birth quotas under the Chinese one-child-per-family policy. Even though “arguments can be made that UNFPA is undertaking good-faith educational and other efforts to improve the lives of the people of [China] and assist them in family planning decisions,” Powell’s letter states, the agency’s funding to the SFPC “allows the Chinese government to implement more effectively its program of coercive abortion.”

The decision provoked a firestorm of negative reaction in Congress and in the media nationwide. Senate Foreign Operations Appropriations Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy (D-VT) deemed it “an embarrassment and a travesty.” “It is ludicrous,” he said, “that because there is coercion in China—coercion we all know about and deplore—the Administration is barring all U.S. support for use anywhere by the world’s largest family planning organization....UNFPA’s mission is to promote alternatives to coercion and abortion and to prevent the spread of AIDS, and that is exactly what UNFPA should be doing [in China]. We do not send foreign aid to countries that are doing everything right—we send it to try to make things better. That is also UNFPA’s mission.”

At this juncture, Congress must force the administration’s hand if UNFPA is to receive any U.S. funding in the near term. A Leahy provision that would do so has been written into the Senate version of the FY 2003 foreign aid bill that has been approved by the appropriations committee but has yet to be considered by the full Senate. Similarly, House Foreign Operations Subcommittee Chairman Jim Kolbe (R-AZ) has included language in the version approved by the House Appropriations Committee that he believes could accomplish the same goal, but it too awaits consideration by the full House. Meanwhile, the \$34 million from FY 2002 remains in limbo, not available for UNFPA but still not approved by key members of Congress for use by USAID until further negotiations concerning UNFPA take place.—S. Cohen ☉