

September 27, 2011

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama,

I am writing you on behalf of ActionAid USA, an international anti-poverty non-governmental organization whose primary aim is to fight poverty worldwide, helping over 13 million impoverished and disadvantaged people in 42 countries. We are the only large international development organization headquartered in Africa, with offices in Asia and the Americas. One of our key issues is women's rights and we are helping women throughout the developing world to challenge discrimination, claim their rights, and transform their societies.

In view of our concern about the negative impacts of gender discrimination, **we urge you to bring the U.S. humanitarian aid policy in compliance with international humanitarian law** - in particular with the right of civilian women sexually assaulted in areas of armed conflict to receive non-discriminatory medical care under the Geneva Conventions. This includes the right to an abortion for victims of war rape.

Thousands of girls and women raped and impregnated in armed conflict are routinely denied critically needed abortions. This is a direct consequence of the current U.S. "no-abortion" policy attached to all humanitarian aid. The abortion restrictions contain no exceptions for rape or to save the life of the women. Even worse, these restrictions have the effect of preventing all foreign governments, NGOs and humanitarian aid providers receiving U.S. funds from providing the option of abortion to girls and women raped. As the U.S. is the largest provider of humanitarian aid, this has devastating consequences for the victims.

Due to U.S. restrictions, a girl or woman who is raped and is denied an abortion when she wants to receive one faces three options: (1) undergoing an unsafe abortion; (2)

carrying to term an unwanted pregnancy that increases her risk of maternal mortality or (3) contemplating committing suicide. Further, when rape is used as a method of genocide and women are denied abortions, this can further the genocidal intent of the perpetrators.

These overly-broad constraints have not gone unnoticed by the global community. On November 5, 2010 during the Universal Periodic Review of the U.S. by the UN Human Rights Council, Norway recommended that the U.S. "remove its blanket abortion restrictions on humanitarian aid covering medical care given to women and girls raped and impregnated in situations of armed conflict." This recommendation has been followed by those of many prominent individuals and organizations throughout the world on the occasion of the 62nd anniversary of the Geneva Conventions, August 12, 2011 who have also written to you on this subject.

Rape as a weapon of war has been recognized as a threat to international security by the Security Council and it has been recognized as a war crime and crime against humanity in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Major-General Patrick Cammaert, former commander of UN peacekeeping forces in the eastern Congo states that because of the increased use of rape that "It has probably become more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier in armed conflict." To the female victims, however, this reality is unacknowledged if it is not met with medical assistance programs that comprehensively deal with their injuries, including safe abortions when desired.

ActionAid USA joins a broad number of public health and human rights experts and organizations around the world in protesting the U.S. abortion restrictions imposed on humanitarian aid. The U.S. has a long history of providing humanitarian aid to victims of war and other disasters. We urge you to ensure that such aid is comprehensive and non-discriminatory by issuing an executive order explicitly lifting the restrictions on abortion services alleviating, not prolonging, female victims' suffering.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Heather A. Paul
Executive Director