

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

August 12, 2014

Re: Ending the Deadly Denial of Abortion Services to Girls and Women Raped in War

Dear President Obama,

Today marks the 65th Anniversary of the Geneva Conventions, which you, in your Nobel Peace Prize speech, pledged to abide by and uphold. This commitment is undercut by your administration's failure to take action to end the deadly denial of safe abortion services to girls and women raped in war—a right they are entitled to under the Conventions.

Systematic rape has become a defining characteristic of nearly all modern conflicts, including the recent bloodshed in Syria, Burma, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic. Girls and women surviving war rape face a myriad of medical consequences, including HIV infection, permanent reproductive damage, fistulas and pregnancy. Pregnancy from rape often compounds the social, psychological and medical consequences associated with war rape and often results in ostracization of women from their families and communities. Rape survivors who become pregnant and are denied abortions—as most are due to current interpretation U.S. policy—face increased maternal morbidity and mortality, including death from dangerous pregnancy and childbearing, illegal abortion, and suicide. This is why it is absolutely essential that safe abortion services are available to girls and women who become pregnant from war rape in all humanitarian medical settings.

The denial of safe abortion services to these war victims isn't just inhumane; it also violates their rights to comprehensive and non-discriminatory medical care under the Geneva Conventions. The US is lagging behind its allies, including the U.K., France and the Netherlands, who have recognized this right under the Geneva Conventions and pledged to ensure that their humanitarian aid can be used to provide safe abortion services. Further, your failure to act is also in conflict with Security Council Resolutions 2106 and 2122, which the US co-sponsored and voted for. These resolutions specifically call on all U.N. member states to ensure that war rape survivors have access to all necessary reproductive health care, including abortion services.

Commendably, the U.S. is the largest humanitarian aid donor in the world; however, for those women and girls who become pregnant from war rape, U.S. aid extends, rather than alleviates, their suffering. Accordingly, we urge you to take immediate action by issuing an Executive Order which restores, at a minimum, the rape, incest and life endangerment exceptions to the Helms Amendment and affirms the rights of girls and women raped in war to all necessary medical care under the Geneva Conventions, including safe abortion.

Your immediate steps, upon taking office, to ensure US compliance with the Geneva Conventions on the rights of detainees was laudable; girls and women raped in war deserve no less.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Janet Benshoof". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Janet" being more prominent than the last name "Benshoof".

Janet Benshoof
President
Global Justice Center

Cc:

John Kerry, Secretary of State

Valerie Jarrett, Senior Advisor to the President

Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations

Tina Tchen, Executive Director of the White House Council on Women and Girls

Anne Richard, Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration

Cathy Russell, Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues