

The Opinion Pages

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Humanitarian Aid for Rape Victims

On his third day in office, President Obama issued an executive order lifting the odious “global gag rule” that denied federal money for family planning work abroad to any group that performed abortions or counseled about the procedure, even with its own money. But he left standing another policy that imposes similar speech restrictions and bans using foreign aid money for abortions — even to save a woman’s life or in cases of rape in war zones like Congo, Sudan and Burma.

The policy is not mandated by any law. Rather, it is an overly restrictive interpretation of the Helms amendment, which was originally enacted in 1973 and bars using foreign aid money to “pay for the performance of abortion as a method of family planning or to motivate or coerce any person to practice abortions.”

Providing abortions for women and girls who have been subjected to the use of rape as a weapon in armed conflict is clearly not “a method of family planning.” And informing rape victims and governments about the right to proper medical treatment, which would include abortion, under the laws of war does not amount to lobbying or coercion. Yet the misinterpretation of the Helms amendment was formalized in a policy directive in 2008 by the United States Agency for International Development and continues to be enforced by other aid programs as well.

A coalition of human rights groups and legal and medical experts led by the Global Justice Center, along with Norway, has issued a call to lift the policy as applied to rape victims. As these groups point out, beyond being cruel and unnecessary, the current interpretation of the Helms amendment violates Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, which entitles all victims of armed conflict — including those brutalized by rape — to complete and non-discriminatory medical treatment. That includes access to abortions and necessary information about the procedure.

Mr. Obama may fear that changing the policy would anger antiabortion extremists in Congress. But that is no excuse for breaking his pledge to abide by the Geneva Conventions. Besides, even the most radical antiabortion bill to pass the Republican House this year — a proposal to restrict abortion services, for example by discouraging employers from offering insurance plans covering abortion — contains exceptions for saving the woman’s life, incest, and, yes, rape.