

NGOs Campaign to Free 17 Salvadoran Women Jailed for Abortion



San Salvador, November 12 (teleSUR-RHC), -- The campaign to free 17 women challenges El Salvador's abortion law enacted in 1998, which makes abortion illegal in all cases, even when a women's life is in danger or in circumstances of rape, incest, or a deformed fetus. This country is one of 28 in the world that prohibits abortion in all cases.

Amnesty International charges that this across-the-board abortion ban is a leading cause of maternal mortality because it forces women to undergo dangerous back-street procedures.

In El Salvador, the law has resulted in 129 women being prosecuted for abortion or aggravated murder; 26 of them were convicted of murder and imprisoned, said the Citizen Group for the Decriminalization of Therapeutic, Ethical and Eugenic Abortion (CFDA).

The campaign to free the 17 women highlights the impact of the abortion law on women, who in many cases are young single mothers too poor to travel abroad to get an abortion in a private clinic.

El Salvador's Health Ministry estimates there are 6,500 clandestine abortions in El Salvador every year, and 11 percent of women and girls who have undergone a clandestine abortion have died.

One of the 17 women represented in the case is Maria Teresa Rivera. When she suffered a miscarriage three years ago, she was handcuffed to a hospital bed, surrounded by seven policemen, charged with murder and sent to jail. After a trial that lasted eight months, Rivera was sentenced to 40 years imprisonment for aggravated murder.

CDDA lawyer Dennis Muñoz says that groups opposing changes in the abortion law include the Roman Catholic Church, evangelical groups, a powerful conservative lobby in Congress and even the left-wing ruling FMLN party.

One of the few voices calling for a change in the law is Mario Soriano, a medical doctor who heads the adolescent development program at El Salvador's health ministry.

"Here social and cultural norms are based on religious values, and not on a rights-based approach," Soriano said. "Religious values often outweigh clinical ethics, as well as the law being applied incorrectly, which means you can get doctors denouncing women of inducing abortions and then calling police to the hospital."

A ruling on the case seeking the release of the 17 women is expected from El Salvador's Supreme Court within eight weeks. Eight of the 15 judges would have to rule in favor of the women for them to be released, and the country's President Salvador Sanchez Ceren of the FMLN would need to agree.

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