Upcoming abortion vote stirring up Mexico City

by S. Lynne Walker

MEXICO CITY - Bomb threats. Protests. Vows by Catholic bishops that legislators, doctors and women will be excommunicated.

As Mexico City lawmakers prepare to vote Tuesday on the legalization of first trimester abortions in the nation's capital, the Catholic Church and pro-life groups are waging an emotional campaign against the measure that is pushing the city to the brink of violent confrontation.

Several council members have received death threats in recent days. The colonial building in downtown Mexico City where they will vote was the target of a bomb threat. And police are blocking downtown streets in response to daily protests.

The Catholic Church, which is prohibited from taking an active role in political matters, is so certain the measure will pass that it is backing a signature drive to demand a voter referendum on the issue. One bishop charged that a "culture of death" now pervades the country.

MEXABORTION - Jorge Serrano Limon, president of the anti-abortion group Provida, holds up a plastic replica of a 12-week-old fetus during a news conference in Mexico City. After campaign against the legalization of abortions for 29 years, Serrano Limon concedes the battle is lost. The City Council is expected to legalize abortions through the 12th week of pregnancy when is meets on Tuesday (April 24). 'This is a nightmare for our country,' Serrano LImon said. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

MEXABORTION - Riot police guard City Hall in Mexico City after several council members who support legislation to legalize abortions received death threats. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

MEXABORTION - As a female police officer stands guard outside City Hall in Mexico City, pro-choice advocates rally in support of next week's council vote (April 24) on the legalization of abortion. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

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With the City Council's regular session scheduled to end April 30, proponents are rushing to perfect the law so it will be immune from an almost certain constitutional challenge. Of the 66 council members, 40 say they support legal abortions, while 21 are opposed. Five members of the council, which is dominated by the leftist Democratic Revolution Party, or PRD, declined to say which way they will vote.

The legalization of abortion in Mexico City signals another dramatic shift in this predominantly Catholic country. Gay civil unions were approved in Mexico City and Coahuila state earlier this year and the country is bracing for a debate in the Senate on the sensitive issue of euthanasia.

The social changes stem partly from Mexico's shift toward a competitive political system, where parties truly vie for votes. They also reflect the values of a younger generation that increasingly rejects conservative ideals in favor of the more open lifestyles of the country's northern neighbors.

Only recently has Mexico - which did not grant women the right to vote until 1953 - begun to acknowledge women's rights as a legitimate social and political issue.

Although Mexico City has allowed rape victims to get abortions since 1931, it was just seven years ago that the law was expanded to include cases where a woman's health was at risk or the fetus showed signs of severe birth defects.

Anti-abortion groups fear this new law, which would permit women in Mexico City to have abortions through their 12th week of pregnancy, will be the catalyst for legalizing abortion not just in other parts of Mexico, but throughout Latin America. Only three countries - Guyana, Puerto Rico and Cuba - permit unrestricted abortions.

All 31 states in Mexico currently permit abortions in cases of rape. Some also allow abortions if the mother's life is endangered or if the fetus is severely damaged. Yucatan is the only state that allows poor women who have at least three children to get an abortion based on economic necessity.

Despite these restrictions, roughly one of every 40 women in Mexico has had an abortion, according to

research by the New York-based Guttmacher Institute, a nonprofit organization that studies sexual and reproductive health issues in the United States and Latin America.

While there are no firm statistics, both supporters and critics of abortion generally agree that Mexican women have between 500,000 and 1.5 million illegal abortions each year.

If that trend continues throughout each woman's reproductive life, the institute said, the average woman in Mexico will likely have at least one abortion by the time she is 50.

TARGETING MATERNAL LOVE

As the fight over abortion intensifies, Mexico City's residents are being bombarded with messages probing the delicate issue of maternal love, which is the bedrock of Mexican society.

In one TV commercial, a revered children's entertainer who has performed for nearly 40 years under the stage name "Chespirito" says doctors urged his mother to have an abortion after she suffered an accident while she was pregnant.

"Me? Abort? Never," he quotes her as saying. "She defended life. My life. Thanks to that, I am here."

Supporters of legal abortions countered with a response from Paulina Ramirez, a 21-year-old Mexicali resident who was denied an abortion when she became pregnant at the age of 13 after being raped at knifepoint.

"How great that they let Chespirito's mother decide," she says. "My family and I would have liked to have been able to decide, too."

Jorge Serrano Limon, president of the anti-abortion group Provida and the nation's most visible pro-life advocate, turned the debate into high drama this week when he stood on the steps of City Hall and held up a tiny plastic replica of a perfectly formed fetus.

After fighting legal abortions since 1978, when Provida was formed, Serrano concedes the battle is lost. He blames the defeat on cultural changes that have robbed Mexico of its moral values.

"We are going to permit a crime that ends the life of human beings who cannot defend themselves, who cannot be heard," he said during an interview in his office on a Mexico City street called Conception Bay. "Yesterday, it was gay civil unions. Today, it is abortions. Tomorrow, they are going to legalize euthanasia. This is a nightmare for our country."

LEFT OUT

Lost in the vitriolic debate are Mexico City's impoverished and indigenous women who either do not want or cannot afford to have children, feminist groups say.

These women have no alternative but to perform abortions on themselves - using dangerous practices like knitting needles or wads of cotton soaked in lye - or turn to clandestine clinics run by inexperienced, and sometimes incompetent, practitioners.

Many women are injured. Some are left sterile. Others don't survive. Illegal abortions are the third highest cause of death among women in Mexico City, according to the City Council president.

"The life of a woman is not important," said Lucia Lagunes, executive secretary of Women's Communication and Information, a pro-choice organization that disseminates information about women's issues. "That is what has the least value in this debate."

Even if the law is passed, Lagunes said clandestine clinics will continue to operate.

"What will be the process to get a legal abortion? How many doctors are willing to perform abortions? We still face a lot of challenges," she said. "These clinics are not going to disappear overnight. This is going to be a long process."

City councilwoman Leticia Quezada has been labeled an "assassin" for her role in helping draft the legislation.

This week she received an e-mail containing a death threat warning that a vote in favor of abortion means, "Your days are numbered."

Quezada said she and other council members who have been threatened over the past few days will not back away from their decision to support legal abortions when the council votes on Tuesday.

"We are in favor of life, but in favor of the lives of the women who are dying on operating tables," said

Quezada, a PRD member who heads the City Council's Gender and Equality Commission. "We are in favor of the lives of women who abort for economic reasons, women who abort because they do feel they are ready to have children, women who abort because they already have all the children they can support, or who simply cannot afford contraceptives.

"If we save the life of one woman, then this will have been worth it."

But the Catholic Church warns that by taking that stand, Quezada and the other legislators who support the law now face the church's most severe punishment.

"Abortion is a sin," said Father Jose de Jesus Aguilar, spokesman for the Catholic archdiocese in Mexico City. "If there were a group of legislators that was in favor of abortion, that advised in favor or legislated in favor of abortion, they would be excommunicated."

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