

Brazil Offers Free Morning-After Pills to Deal with 1.4 Million Illegal Abortions

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Brazil's Health Minister, José Gomes Temporão, has indicated that the Brazilian government intends to add the morning-after pill to the country's program of family planning for the poor. They already get free condom and almost-free contraceptives (they cost US\$ 2.40 for a year's supply).

As is the case with birth-control pills, women will not need a prescription to get the morning-after medicine.

Temporão made the announcement, this Monday, June 25, in São Paulo during a meeting promoted by influential daily Folha de S. Paulo. According to the minister, the measure will be important to lower the number of undesired pregnancies and dangerous abortions: "Our program will do without any prescription. It would be nonsense to require the woman to look for a doctor to get a prescription."

The morning-after pill is most effective when taken soon after unprotected sex. While the product is 95% effective up to 24 hours after sexual intercourse, its efficacy falls to 85% if taken between 25 and 48 hours after the sex act. Between 49 and 72 hours it doesn't prevent more than 58% of the pregnancies.

The emergency contraception pill was legalized in Brazil in 1999 and has been available in pharmacies all across the country since then.

Biologist and professor at São Paulo Federal University, Doctor Lilian Piñero Eça, has criticized the government action and called the morning-after pill "nothing more than a hormonal bomb that triggers an abortion."

She is also a member of the Scientific Nucleus of the National Movement in Defense of Life. Religious groups and anti-abortion movements have also panned the Lula administration for the way Brazil has been making it easier for the poor to access abortion and other ways of family control.

Brazil's Health Ministry says that for every three live births in Brazil there is an abortion, which is illegal in the country. This means a total of 1.4 million clandestine abortions every year. Commenting on these numbers, Temporão stated:

"If we consider that abortion is a crime, every day, 780 women would have to be arrested, without mentioning their doctors and eventually their companions."

According to the Brazilian legislation from 1940, which is still in force, abortion is a crime unless the mother has been raped or the delivery is life threatening for the woman. For this reason clandestine clinics often staffed by amateurs have proliferated throughout the country.

"I won't accept that people say that abortion is not a public health problem," said the minister reminding that about 250,000 women have to be taken to hospitals every year due to medical complications brought in by mishandled abortions.

According to Temporão, the fetus has legal protection after 12 weeks of gestation when the central nervous system starts to take shape. Before this time, he states, "there is no conscience or pain."

Since taking office earlier this year the health minister has been attacked by anti-abortion groups. Their criticism grew louder the days before pope Benedict XVI's visit to Brazil in May.