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New Push to Extend Controversial Maputo Plan of Action in Africa

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(NEW YORK – C-FAM) Last week, the African Union (AU) held a continental conference on maternal and child health in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to discuss the possibility of extending the non-binding **Maputo Plan of Action on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights** (Maputo PoA), which was scheduled to expire this year.

The conference, themed "Achieving the MDGs through the Accelerated Reduction of Maternal and Child Mortality in Africa," brought together maternal and child health experts from AU Member States, United Nations (UN) agencies and non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives to discuss ways of reducing the high rates of maternal mortality in the continent, and in particular to review a lengthy extension of the Maputo PoA through 2015 to coincide with the time frame of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Originally discussed at an AU special session of health ministers in September 2006, the Maputo PoA was designed as a short-term, three-year action plan. Among other things, it includes abortion provisions which call for AU member states to "enact policies and legal frameworks to reduce incidence of unsafe abortion" and to "prepare and implement national plans of action to reduce incidence of unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortion."

Abortion advocates have been vocal champions of the Maputo PoA, declaring the document a regional victory in Africa in their work to achieve a universal right to abortion. While proponents present the Maputo PoA as a consensus document of the AU, in 2007 high level government officials told the **Friday Fax** that African heads of state never approved the document and that trickery and deception were used by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and others to push the document through various AU meetings.

Back in 2006, several AU delegations objected to the abortion provisions contained in the draft Maputo PoA and only gave their approval to the draft on the understanding that the abortion provisions would be removed from the text. The changes were never made and when delegates later realized that the abortion provision had not been removed, several said they felt "manipulated" by the AU secretariat.

UNFPA declared that the PoA would form the basis for their work in Africa. In her address to the AU assembly last week, Etta Tadesse, UNFPA's regional representative, pushed for the extension and said that "clearly, the time frame for the implementation of Maputo Plan of Action has not been sufficient."

While the Maputo Plan of Action is non-binding and its legitimacy as a consensus document remains highly controversial, experts warn that the targets and indicators on abortion will continue to be used to pressure AU member states to amend their laws on abortion as part of maternal mortality reduction.

The Maputo Plan of Action bears a similar name with another document called the **Maputo Protocol**, which is a regional treaty that is binding on states that have ratified it. So far this includes 27 of the 53 AU members. Future ratifications remain uncertain as controversy swells around the Protocol's provision for legalized abortion on demand. At least one state that ratified the Protocol explicitly rejected this provision.

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