Argentina will guarantee access to abortion in rape cases

Buenos Aires, December 14 (RHC)-- Women and girls in Argentina seeking to end pregnancies caused by rape will be guaranteed access to abortion under a protocol aimed at reducing the latitude hospitals have in deciding whether or not to perform the procedure.

Argentinean law allows abortion in case of rape or threat to the life or health of the mother. But abortion rights advocates say the law is not always applied across the largely Roman Catholic country and that local hospitals have too much power to decide which cases fall under the legal criteria.

"The protocol will be used as a guide, especially in cases where the law clearly allows for the interruption of pregnancies," Health Minister Gines Gonzalez Garcia told a news conference. He was sworn in on Tuesday after leftist President Alberto Fernandez was inaugurated.

"We are respectful of conscientious objection but conscientious objection cannot be used as an institutional alibi for not complying with the law," Gonzalez Garcia added.

The human rights group Amnesty International issued a statement celebrating the new protocol, which goes into effect on Friday. Only Uruguay, Cuba and Guyana have legalized abortion in Latin America, according to the Center for Reproductive Rights.

Argentina's former health secretary quit last month after a protocol he had signed, aimed at making abortion more available, was revoked by then-President Mauricio Macri, who was defeated by Fernandez in the October election.

Alberto Fernandez has said he favors abortion rights. Proposals to widen the availability of abortion have been batted back and forth between the lower House and Senate for years.

There are at least 350,000 illegal abortions in the country every year, the Ministry of Health estimates, although international human rights groups say the number may be higher.

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