

Philippines to offer free contraceptives to poor

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Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has ordered government agencies to ensure free access to contraceptives for 6 million women who cannot obtain them, officials said Wednesday, in a move expected to be opposed by the dominant Roman Catholic church.

Economic Planning Secretary Ernesto Pernia said the intensified drive to make contraceptives available and ensure "zero unmet need for family planning" is important to reduce poverty. He said the government's target is to cut the poverty rate from 21.6 percent in 2015 to 14 or 13 percent by the end of Duterte's term in 2022.

The executive order Duterte signed Monday said out of the 6 million women with unmet needs for modern family planning, 2 million have been identified as poor. The 2 million women should have access to them by 2018, and all the rest thereafter, the order added.

It also directs government agencies to locate couples with unmet family planning needs, mobilize agencies up to the village level and partner with civil society in intensifying the drive.

The Philippines is the only Asia-Pacific country where the rate of teen pregnancies rose over the last two decades, the U.N. Population Fund said last year. It said the slow decline of the country's overall fertility rate may deprive the Philippines of faster economic growth expected in similar countries that have more working-age people than younger and older dependents.

In 2015, the Supreme Court issued a temporary restraining order on certain provisions of a landmark Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Law following appeals by anti-abortion groups that view contraceptives as causing abortions. The court prohibited the distribution of a contraceptive implant and put on hold the renewal of licenses for other contraceptives. The government has appealed for the lifting of the temporary restraining order.

"The government cannot continue to tolerate this delay in judgment because time is of the essence as far as the implementation of the RPRH Law is concerned," Pernia said.

He said 11 Filipino women die each day from complications of pregnancy and delivery and the law will reduce maternal deaths and teen pregnancies in addition to enabling families to have the number of children they want.

Juan Antonio Perez, executive director of the Commission on Population, said if the contraceptives are made available to the 6 million women with unmet family planning needs, the contraceptive prevalence rate can increase to 65 percent, from the current 40 percent.

The Philippines' population, now at 104 million, is growing at a rate of around 1.7 percent yearly, but the growth may be reduced to 1.4 percent if the campaign is fully implemented by 2022, Perez added.

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