

Philippines to implement family planning law in blow to church

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A long-awaited Philippine family planning law to provide free hormonal contraceptives is finally going ahead, health officials said Thursday, ending a two-year impasse in which the Supreme Court demanded proof that they did not cause abortions.

The announcement marked a victory over the influential Catholic church which counts most of the Philippine population as followers and opposes all forms of artificial contraception.

Health Secretary Francisco Duque said 51 types of [contraceptive](#) pills, coils and injectables could now be distributed to the public after the Food and Drug Administration certified they did not cause abortions, defeating a petition filed by a Catholic group.

"It is now all systems go for us in the Department of Health to implement the (Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health) law," Duque told reporters.

For years, the Church has waged a bruising battle against government efforts to promote birth control despite the country's widespread poverty and ballooning population.

The [reproductive health](#) law granting access to contraceptives was passed in 2012 despite strong Church opposition. However abortion remains illegal.

A religious group filed a case with the Supreme Court charging that many of the government-issued contraceptives were abortifacients and therefore banned.

This prompted the court to issue in 2015 a restraining order on the 51 contraceptives pending a finding by the FDA.

Government stocks of the contraceptives, acquired before this [court order](#), are now being delivered to [health](#) offices and development groups to ensure they can be distributed before they expire, Duque said.

President Rodrigo Duterte, a fierce critic of the Catholic [church](#) who was elected last year, has promised to deliver the free contraceptives to women as part of his reproductive health push.

Despite Church lobbying to cut funding for contraceptives, Duque said the government had budgeted 4.2 billion pesos (\$82 million) for implementation of the law this year.

The head of the government's Population Commission, Juan Antonio Perez, said the two years that the [court](#) order was in place had likely resulted in 500,000 unplanned pregnancies.

Perez said that the Philippines had 20 million women of reproductive age, six million of whom were already using contraceptives.

Perez added a million more were expected to start using contraceptives each year now that the ban had been lifted.

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