

# Pesky abortion issue resurfaces in Jamaica

Ingrid Brown

Special to Sentinel-Voice

KINGSTON (IPS)—The growing number of babies being killed or abandoned at birth here has once again put the debate to legalize abortion out front.

"If an abortion is properly done, nothing is wrong and the woman will be able to have as many children as she wants when she is ready. Nobody should decide for a woman whether she wants her baby or not," said one gynecologist who requested

anonymity.

Because abortions are now illegal, many women either resort to abandoning their babies at birth or turn to clandestine abortion practitioners, thereby endangering their lives.

Marie Smith (not her real name) was only 13 when she became the victim of a date rape that resulted in pregnancy. The youngest daughter of a Christian family, Smith was doing well in high school and could not imagine having the baby. The

only way out was an abortion, she said.

But the procedure, performed by a pharmacist in one of the inner city areas in Kingston, nearly cost Smith her life. Had she died, the pharmacist could have faced life imprisonment.

Under Jamaican law, it is a crime for a pregnant woman to take poison or any other toxic substance, or to use any instrument of any kind to abort a fetus. Any woman who does so is guilty of a felony and, if convicted, faces

life in prison.

And, a doctor or any other person who performs an abortion without justifiable medical reason can also be jailed. But, the authorities say that prosecuting someone for having an abortion is not a priority.

Deputy Superintendent of Police James Forbes said he has never heard of anyone being arrested for performing an abortion. "I think it is more a theory than something which is enforced."

But because abortion is

illegal, it is not very accessible or affordable. This has resulted in many young women, mainly those in the rural areas, resorting to drinking a wide variety of herbal mixtures in an attempt to abort the fetus themselves.

In urban areas, women tend to seek the assistance of unqualified abortion practitioners, such as pharmacists. This often results in medical complications and sometimes even death. As a result of the botched abortion, Smith has

had severe medical problems and may never be able to conceive.

"My parents didn't know anything about abortions and so it was my cousin who suggested that I could go to this pharmacist. We didn't even know that he didn't know what he was doing," she said.

Ilene Thomas calls herself an herbalist. She said she often brews herbal mixtures to assist girls who want to abort their babies. "You just (See Abortion, Page 20)

## Congo's Kabila discusses peace

KINSHASA, Congo (AP)—A peace agreement signed in Libya does not mean the end of Congo's civil war, the embattled Congolese president said.

President Laurent Kabila said in a Monday interview that the accord is simply a "prelude to peace."

"The invaders will never leave unless they are forced" he said on state television.

He insisted, however, that he had received assurances from Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni that Uganda would recall all its troops.

The mixed signals from Kabila follow a cease-fire deal brokered by Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi that was announced Sunday.

The deal was reached between Kabila and the presidents of Chad and Uganda, according to Libya's state-run news agency, JANA.

"They have made the commitment to do it. When one makes such a pact one has to respect it," he said.

But Ugandan officials denied they were planning a pullout immediately. A senior Ugandan official said

Museveni would only withdraw his troops if a neutral force was put in place to ensure security along Uganda's border.

Museveni "has always said so long as there was a credible force in Congo, he will pull out (Uganda's troops) tomorrow," said John Nagenda, a senior public relations advisor to Museveni.

Uganda sent troops into Congo last year, arguing that Kabila's army had been negligent in protecting their common border against Ugandan rebels attacking from eastern Congo.

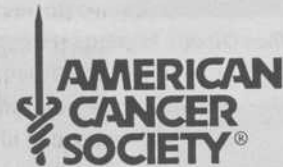
Rwanda, the main backer of the rebels, said it did not feel bound by the agreement.

"At no stage prior to the conclusion of said agreement was the Rwandan government consulted," a Rwandan government statement said.

The peace plan calls for the withdrawal of foreign troops fighting in Congo and the deployment of African peacekeepers.

Uganda and Rwanda have troops backing the Congolese rebels, who took up arms in

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