

## **Woman dies after doctors fail to intervene because of new abortion law in Nicaragua**

*Managua, Nicaragua*

Sophie Arie

A hospital in Nicaragua is investigating the death of a woman after doctors failed to intervene to save her life during complications in pregnancy.

It is suspected that doctors did not dare to carry out an abortion because a new law has been approved that bans all forms of abortion, whether a woman has been raped or risks death during pregnancy.

Under the law, women who terminate their pregnancies and doctors who carry out abortions will face up to 20 years in jail. Although the law has yet to be signed into effect by the country's conservative president, the fear of punishment already seems to be discouraging doctors from treating some women.

On 2 November, the young woman died at a Managua hospital after doctors failed to intervene to stop vaginal bleeding. Some doctors told local media they did not treat the woman for fear of breaking the law. The hospital is investigating why the woman was not treated properly.

Last week, a woman with heart problems in her 15th week of pregnancy was still waiting for a possible abortion at a hospital in the town of Masaya while doctors deliberated over the legality of treatment.

Deputies from the three main parties supported the law in a vote just 10 days before presidential elections in which the country's former Marxist guerrilla leader, Daniel Ortega, was elected 16 years after his Sandinista government was voted out of power.

Ortega, now 60, whose 1979-80 Sandinista government clashed with senior members of the Catholic church, says that these days he is more Christian than Marxist.

Amid fear of losing the support of the church in the final stages of the election campaign, some 25 Sandinista deputies voted with conservative lawmakers for the abortion ban on 27 October.

The law, which overturned a 130 year old policy allowing "therapeutic" abortion, comes as some of the regions most conservative countries, such as Chile and Mexico, have begun to loosen their strict abortion laws under pressure to modernise.

"This is taking our country backwards," said Azahalea Solis of the Nicaraguan Women's Autonomous Movement. "Thousands of women could die because of this."

Reliable figures are hard to come by in Nicaragua, the second poorest country in the region after Haiti. In the past three years only 24 legal abortions have been registered, including one in 2004 carried out on a nine year old rape victim.

In this small country with about 5.5 million inhabitants, abortion is widely condemned by the population, around 70% of whom are Catholic and another 25% belong to evangelical churches.

But women's rights groups estimate that at least 4000 women turn to public health services each year with life threatening complications during pregnancy or after failed backstreet operations.

"These women will now be afraid to go to hospitals," said Marta Maria Blandón Gadea, regional director of Ipas, the US based international women's health rights group. "They will be afraid of being accused of committing a crime. We are seeing the first cases of that already."