

Throng of people march in support of abortion rights

By Elizabeth Wolfe
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Abortion-rights supporters marched in huge numbers Sunday, roused in this election year by what they see as an erosion of reproductive freedoms under President Bush and foreign policies they say hurt women worldwide.

Political agitation suffused the gathering of hundreds of thousands. Their target: Bush, like-minded officials in federal and state government and religious conservatives.

Speaking beyond the masses to policy-makers, Francis Kissling of Catholics for a Free Choice declared, "You will hear our pro-choice voices ringing in your ears until such time that you permit all women to make our own reproductive choices."

Women joined the protest from across the nation and from nearly 60 countries, asserting that damage from Bush's policies is spreading far beyond U.S. shores through measures such as the ban on federal money for family-planning groups that promote or perform abortions abroad.

The rally on the National Mall stretched from the base of the U.S. Capitol about a mile back to the Washington Monument. Authorities no

longer give formal crowd estimates, but various police sources informally estimated the throng at between 500,000 and 800,000 strong.

That would exceed the estimated 500,000 who protested for abortion rights in 1992.

Carole Mehlman, 68, came from Tampa, Fla., to support a cause that has motivated her to march for 30 years, as long as abortion has been legal.

"I just had to be here to fight for the next generation and the generation after that," she said. "We cannot let them take over our bodies, our health care, our lives."

Advocates said abortion rights are being weakened at the margins through federal and state restrictions and will be at risk of reversal at the core if Bush gets a second term.

"Know your power and use it," Rep. Nancy Pelosi of California, House Democratic leader, exhorted the masses. "It is your choice, not the politicians."

And feminist Gloria Steinem accused Bush of squandering international good will and taking positions so socially conservative that he seems — according to Steinem — to be in league with the likes of Muslim extremists or the Vatican.

Democratic Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York, referring to the 1973 Supreme Court decision

legalizing abortion, said the administration is "filled with people who ... consider Roe v. Wade the worst abomination of constitutional law in our history."

Organizers set up voter registration tables; supporters of John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate, handed out stickers. The event was not overtly partisan but denunciations of Bush set the tone from the stage and the ground.

The throngs gathered by the Washington Monument for opening speeches and set off along Pennsylvania Avenue, looping back to the Mall near the Capitol. They moved slowly, bottlenecked by their own numbers.

A much smaller contingent of abortion opponents assembled along a portion of the route to protest what they called a "death march." Among them were women who had had abortions and regretted it; they dressed in black.

Tabitha Warnica, 36, of Phoenix, said she had two abortions when she was young. "We don't have a choice. God is the only one who can decide," she said.

Police used barricades and a heavy presence at that site to keep it from becoming a flashpoint. Both sides yelled at each other as the vanguard of the march reached the counter-demonstration.

NEWS IN BRIEF

World finance officials pledge more support for global poverty

WASHINGTON (AP) — World finance ministers promised on Sunday to do more to deal with the crushing burden of global poverty, promising help in such areas as education, debt relief and AIDS.

But activists said the weekend meetings of the 184-nation International Monetary Fund and World Bank failed to back up the warm words with cold cash.

Separately, the United States said it had made progress pushing a new initiative to bolster peace prospects in the Middle East by promoting economic development and jobs.

Treasury Secretary John Snow told reporters Sunday that he had been encouraged by the support the United States received on the issue both from potential donor countries and from officials from the region.

Many countries are seeking ways to provide aid.

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