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## Condoms won't solve AIDS, says Pope

YAOUNDE (Cameroon): Pope Benedict XVI said condoms are not the answer to the AIDS epidemic in Africa and can make the problem worse, setting off criticism yesterday as he began a week-long trip to the continent where some 22 million people are living with HIV.

Benedict's first statement on an issue that has divided even Catholic clergy working with AIDS patients came hours before he arrived in Cameroon's capital — greeted by thousands of flag-waving faithful.

In his four years as pope, Benedict had never directly addressed condom use, although his position is not new. His predecessor, Pope John Paul II, often said that sexual abstinence — not condoms — was the best way to prevent the spread of the disease.

Benedict also said the Roman Catholic Church was at the forefront of the battle against AIDS. "You can't resolve it with the distribution of condoms," the pope said. "On the contrary, it increases the problem."

The Vatican has advocated fidelity in marriage and abstinence from premarital sex as key weapons in the fight against AIDS.



MESSAGE OF HOPE: Pope Benedict XVI waves to the crowd upon his arrival at Younde airport yesterday on the first day of a six-day visit to Africa — AFPpic

Three-quarters of all AIDS deaths worldwide in 2007 were in sub-Saharan Africa, where some 22 million people are infected with HIV — accounting for two-thirds of the world's infections, according to UNAIDS.

Rebecca Hodes with the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa said if the pope is serious about preventing HIV infections, he should focus on promot-

ing wide access to condoms and spreading information on how to use them. "Instead, his opposition to condoms conveys that religious dogma is more important to him than the lives of Africans," said Hodes.

Even some priests and nuns working with those infected with the AIDS virus question the church's opposition to condoms. Ordinary Africans do as well.

Stanley Obale Okpu, a civil servant working in the ministry of urban development in Cameroon, said: "What the pope says is an ideal for the Catholic church. But he needs to look at the realities on the ground. One should be aware of these realities. In the case of Cameroon — and Africa as a whole — condoms are very necessary ... You need condoms to prevent AIDS and birth control." — AP