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# P'pine bishops call for sacking over condoms

MANILA: Catholic bishops in the Philippines on Tuesday called for the health secretary to be sacked as they sought to escalate a row over the government's promotion of condoms.

The sensitive birth-control issue in the Roman Catholic nation flared last week after Health Secretary Esperanza Cabral led a campaign to hand out free condoms on Valentine's Day as part of the battle against HIV and AIDS.

"It's so immoral for someone in the government to be pushing the use of condoms, which we all know is not deterrent to AIDS preven-

tion," Bishop Ramon Arguelles, of the Lipa diocese south of Manila, said in a church statement.

The Catholic Church forbids artificial birth control, including condoms.

The statement, signed by two other bishops, was posted on the website of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, an organisation grouping the Southeast Asian nation's church leaders.

The statement urged President Gloria Arroyo to dismiss Cabral, saying she should not be allowed to influence the nation's young.

"It's worrying because it is the morality in society, especially among the youth, that is at stake," Arguelles said.

Arroyo's spokesman Gary Olivar brushed off the bishops' call.

"We should remember that public officials should be judged by standards of public policy interest as set forth in our laws and legal precedents and not the morality of this or that institution," Olivar told reporters.

About 75 million Filipinos, out of a national population of 93 million, are Catholics, a legacy of the country's Spanish colonial past.—AFP