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HEADLINE: HUNDREDS OF SOMALI WOMEN PROTEST AGAINST FEMALE CIRCUMCISION AS NATIONWIDE CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE PRACTICE BEGINS

BYLINE: MOHAMED OLAD HASSAN; Associated Press Writer

DATELINE: MOGADISHU, Somalia

Hundreds of women marched through the streets of Somalia's capital in a rare public protest against female circumcision as aid groups began a nationwide campaign to stop the traditional practice.

The demonstration took place Monday to coincide with the launch of the campaign which is being organized by three Somali women's umbrella groups representing more than 100 organizations in the Horn of Africa nation, U.N. agencies and international aid groups.

Details of the campaign have yet to be worked out, but it is intended to educate Somalis about the harmful effects of female circumcision, said Maryan Ali Obsiye, secretary-general of the Somali Women's Chamber of Commerce.

The United Nations estimates that 98 percent of women in the Muslim nation have been circumcised.

The custom is seen as a rite of passage to womanhood in the nation of 7 million. It is also sometimes viewed as a religious practice.

"We want to make it clear that there is no religious basis for this practice," said Obsiye.

Circumcision ranges from clipping or burning the clitoris to cutting off all the outer labia and sewing closed the remaining tissue, leaving only a tiny opening.

An estimated 130 million women, most of them in Africa, have been subjected to ritual genital cutting. The number is believed to grow by up to 2 million each year.

The practice is illegal in 18 countries, nine of them in Africa.

But Somalia has been without an effective central government since the 1991 ouster of dictator Mohamed Siad Barre and circumcision remains widespread.

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