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HEALTH

'Abortion drone' delivers abortion pills in Poland

LIVE BLOGS

Abortion in Poland is largely illegal, but a pro-choice group is hoping to change that. "Women on Waves" delivers abortion pills by drone to Poland to raise awareness. Louise Osborne reports from Slubice, Poland.



With rotors spinning and packs of pills hanging below, a drone hovered across the German-Polish border on Saturday to deliver abortion drugs to women in Poland, where the procedure is illegal.

"Women on Waves," a non-profit organization of doctors and activists from the Netherlands, flew the so-called "abortion drone" from Germany and over the Oder River into the Polish border town of Slubice to highlight Poland's restrictive abortion laws.

Women on Waves have so far delivered two packs of mifepristone and misoprostol pills to two women. It was the first time the organization had delivered abortion drugs using a drone, but Kleiverda said they'd already been asked about sending the medicine to Ireland and had considered similar action to send pills to Brazil from Uruguay.



Marta wants to have the right to have a safe, legal abortion in Poland

Despite German police trying to prevent the action taking place in Slubice, the World Health Organization approved pills made it to the other side, where women were waiting to use them.

Marta, a 30-year-old from Warsaw, who took one of the tablets, said she was "outraged" that she was not able to legally get hold of such methods in her home country.

"It's adding to a lot of stress," she said. "I don't like how me wanting the right to have a safe and legal abortion makes me fall into the picture of someone who's not responsible and doesn't have control. That's the discourse that's popular in Poland and that's so hurtful."

Restrictive abortion laws

Poland, a Roman Catholic Country, is one of only a few European countries where abortion is largely banned. It is only permitted when a woman's life or health is at risk health, when the fetus is severely malformed or when there is evidence of the pregnancy resulting from rape or incest.

However, fear of prosecution means that even in cases where abortion would be allowed, doctors are often scared of carrying out the procedure, says Gunilla Kleiverda, a gynecologist with Women on Waves.

"We have evidence that a 14-year-old girl who was raped wasn't helped by doctors," she said. "Women don't receive the care even when they are legally entitled...We can't change the law, but we can create attention, and then the people in the country will have to take their own action."

Pro-life activists had vowed to shoot down the drone, but instead showed up to protest against the action after the pills had been delivered. Around a dozen demonstrators handed out small plastic fetuses and stood holding placards.

"I understand that it's very difficult for the women, but on the other side it's a life, it's a child," Teresa Skraburska, a midwife and member of the Polish Catholic Mission in Berlin, says holding a banner showing a hanging child within the body of a woman.

"It's the duty of society to take these women and children and to help them. The children can be given up for adoption.," she says.

"But the problem is that it's a difficult procedure and women can get these tablets so easily. But it's the responsibility of the state to give these women another option."

A lack of safe options

The underground abortion industry in Poland is thought to be thriving. At least 50,000 illegal abortions are estimated to take place each year, with many other women traveling to surrounding countries, like Germany, to get the procedure, according to UN figures.



Teresa Skraburska (right): it's society's responsibility to show options other than abortion open to women.

"There are very desperate women who would pay anything. But women who can afford that are the lucky ones, there are many women who can't," said Marta.

A lack of sufficient sex education in schools and access to contraception and relevant information in Poland means there is a need for safe abortions for women, Kleiverda adds.

Still, despite the problems, Malgorzata Prokop Paczkowski, a member of parliament with the Twoj Ruch party, said legislation in Poland is unlikely to change any time soon.

"It's quite sure that in October right-wing parties will be in parliament, and there will be a complete ban on abortion," she said.

For women wanting a choice, she said, there is little hope. But she added that "maybe thanks to action like this, Polish citizens will understand that by giving power to right-wing parties, they are taking away their freedom. Freedom is the most important thing and Polish women should have the same rights as those people on the other side of the Oder."

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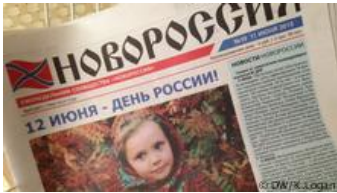
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