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# Dutch 'abortion ship' due in Guatemala

February 23, 2017

A Dutch "abortion ship" was Thursday due to arrive in a Guatemalan port to provide free help to women to end unwanted pregnancies, aiming to circumvent the country's strict laws.

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Abortion is only allowed in Guatemala in cases where the mother's life is in danger, the non-profit organisation Women on Waves said, adding there are some 65,000 illegal and unsafe abortions in the Central American country every year.

The ship will visit the harbour of the Puerto San Jose, about 100 kilometres (60 miles) south of Guatemala City and will stay for five days, the organisation said in a statement.

"The ship can provide women with free legal medical abortions till 10 weeks of pregnancy after sailing to international waters, 12 miles outside Guatemala," it added.

Counselling, treatment and after care would also be available for women seeking their services.

Women choosing to end their pregnancy will be given a combination of two pills, known as a "medical abortion" which "scientific research by the World Health Organisation has shown ... is very safe and effective," the Amsterdam-based organisation said.

Every year some "21,600 women are hospitalised with complications, and unsafe abortions are the third cause of maternal death" in Guatemala, it added.

Women on Waves was set up in 1999, and has sparked controversy in the past with its abortion ships.

Its founder, Rebecca Gomberts, confirmed to AFP that the Guatemala trip was the first since a 2012 campaign in Morocco, when the Moroccan navy blocked the harbour to prevent the ship from docking.

Speaking late Wednesday from Guatemala before the campaign was unveiled, Gomberts said the team was "very nervous" about putting in place all the correct preparations and legal paperwork.

Although all abortions are illegal in Guatemala, except to save the mother's life, "the medical abortions are provided in international waters" which "means there is no violation of the Guatemalan abortion law," the organisation said.

In past years, a Women on Waves ship has also visited Ireland, Poland,



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Portugal and Spain, sparking protests in each country from pro-life groups.

The group argued Thursday that "especially at the dawn of the Zika crisis, access to safe abortion is fundamentally an issue of social justice".

It urged the Guatemalan government to "remove abortion from the penal code" saying it was "a regular medical procedure and a human right" and called for access to contraceptives and free, safe abortions.

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