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Moroccan protesters clash with police over abortion activist ship; port closed

By Associated Press, Updated: Thursday, October 4, 10:10 AM

SMIR, Morocco — Moroccan protesters targeting a Dutch abortion-rights activist scuffled with police Thursday in a port where a ship promoting safe abortion had been due to land.

The protesters, some in conservative Muslim robes and headscarves, carried pictures of bloody embryos and shouted “terrorist” and “assassin” at Rebecca Gomperts in the Atlantic coast town of Smir.

As they tried to get closer to the activist, shouting and waving their arms, police pushed back the protesters and Gomperts was escorted away for her own protection.

She was in Smir to greet a Dutch ship promoting access to and awareness about abortions. Soon before its scheduled arrival Thursday, Moroccan authorities closed the port.

A government official at the port said it was sealed for “military maneuvers,” but did not elaborate. He refused to identify himself. A naval vessel and an inflatable motor boat could be seen patrolling the harbor, which was filled with recreational yachts.

The “Women on Waves” boat was aiming for its first landfall in a Muslim country. It was invited to Morocco by a local women’s rights organization seeking the legalization of abortion in this North African kingdom.

The Moroccan government says the boat did not have permission to come.

Abortion is illegal in most cases in Morocco and it also is forbidden to give out information about such procedures.

However, the so-called morning after pill is available in Moroccan pharmacies. Activist Marlies Schellekens said the boat and a hotline set up by the group will explain how medication available in Morocco can be safely used to end early pregnancies.

According to activists, 600-800 abortions are performed illegally every day in Morocco with only 250 of them by licensed practitioners.

Founded in 1999, the Women on Waves organization seeks to spread information about safe medical abortions through medication and has previously angered authorities in conservative Catholic countries, where abortion is also often frowned upon.

Women can be counseled or provided abortion medication on the ship outside the territorial waters of the countries that outlaw the procedure. The ship has carried out campaigns in Ireland, Poland and Spain, and was banned from entering Portugal's waters in 2004.

At the Moroccan protest Thursday, 23-year-old Abdessamad Zilali said, "We are here because we cannot accept these values, the values of massacre."

Activist Gomperts said the ship's work is important to raise awareness. "When the ship goes, we hope women will have the information to get abortions themselves."

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