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Dutch abortion ship reaches Morocco in secret

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A controversial "abortion ship" belonging to a Dutch NGO docked in Morocco in secret several days ago, its organisers admitted on Thursday after reporting that its access had been blocked.

"The boat has been here for several days. It arrived before the announcement" on Monday that it was sailing to Morocco, said Marlies Schellekens, one of two abortion doctors involved in the visit.

An AFP journalist at Smir harbour was able to see the boat around 20 metres (yards) from the shore.

Security forces, deployed in the area since early on Thursday, were restricting access to the harbour, located 40 kilometres (20 miles) east of Tangier.

Liesbeth van Tongeren, a Dutch left-wing MP who travelled to Smir for the ship's visit, explained that the boat arrived earlier than the organisers said it would to avoid being stopped by the authorities.

"It was the only way of getting to the Moroccan coast," she told AFP.

Women on Waves, the Dutch group organising the trip, says the ship's visit, which they hope will last five or six days, is designed to help women induce "safe legal medical abortions," by offering them the necessary medication and advice.

But the AFP journalist there said that, for the moment, there was no way of reaching the boat, given the heavy police presence at the harbour.

Women on Waves had announced that the boat was travelling to Morocco on Monday, in its first trip to Muslim country, but were secretive about its precise destination and arrival time.

Two days later they said it would arrive at Smir on Thursday at 1300 GMT, and then on Thursday morning they claimed a Moroccan warship was barring the ship's access to the harbour.

Abortion is illegal in Morocco, and the health ministry had said on Wednesday that the ship was not authorised to operate in Morocco and called on the relevant authorities to prevent it from doing so.

In the past 11 years, a Women on Waves ship has visited Ireland, Poland, Portugal and Spain, sparking protests in each country from pro-life groups.



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