

## Morocco blocks Dutch 'abortion' ship

By NBC News staff and wire services

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Paul Schemm / AP Moroccan women protest the scheduled arrival of a Dutch ship advocating safe and legal abortions in Smir, Morocco Thursday oct 4 2012. Their signs read "no to abortion." Moroccan authorities sealed a port where a Dutch abortion ship was set to arrive, while demonstrators protested against its arrival.

Morocco barred Dutch abortion rights activists Thursday from docking their campaign ship to spread awareness about safe abortion methods in a Muslim country that bans the practice.

Women on Waves announced last week its intention to send their ship into the Moroccan port of Smir after visits to traditionally Roman Catholic countries Spain, Portugal and Ireland at the invitation of local women's groups. Such visits began 11 years ago, the BBC reported.

The group says it intends to raise awareness about the use of pills for medical abortions and that it would carry out terminations of pregnancies aboard its own ship on international waters.

Earlier Thursday, Marlies Schellekens, a doctor from Women on Waves, said that Smir harbour was "totally blocked by warships so no one can get in," a day after Rabat said the activists would be barred from arriving by sea.

Rebecca Gomperts, the founder of Women on Waves, told the BBC the group planned to launch "a surprise" in response, but she did not provide further details.

But Moroccan sources later said Women on Waves had actually sent only a yacht into Smir several days ago rather than their usual larger main campaign ship in the apparent expectation that Morocco would not let the group in anyway.

"The yacht has now left Smir to head back home. It was a publicity stunt," an official source said.

"The organizers took everyone for a ride ... The people (in the yacht) stayed aboard and did not complete immigration procedures that would have allowed them to enter Moroccan territory."

Women on Waves had been invited to Morocco by local rights group Alternative Movement for Individual Freedoms (MALI).

According to the BBC, Women on Waves wanted to publicize the fact that an abortion-inducement drug is already available to women in Morocco, but most are unaware of it.

The group told the BBC it had also launched a hotline for women to obtain information about contraception and abortion.

In Morocco, as in other Muslim states, abortion is illegal and punishable by up to 20 years in prison. But hundreds of illegal abortions are carried out daily in underground clinics or using herbal medicines, sometimes causing death or injury. Women on Waves told the BBC between 600 and 800 abortions take place every day in Morocco.

Each year hundreds of Moroccan single mothers are forced to abandon or give up their babies for adoption because of the stigma linked to abortion and pre-marital pregnancy.

"I understand that (the visit) is seen as a provocation by some religious groups. But this is about women's health. It has nothing to do with religion," Gomperts, told AFP by phone earlier this week.

On Wednesday Interior Minister Mohand Laenser, a secular member of the government led since December by moderate Islamists, said the Women on Waves would not be allowed into Morocco. "The organizers have never contacted us to seek permission to visit Morocco," Laenser told Reuters.

The Moroccan Association Against Clandestine Abortion said in June that legislation on abortion was out of step with social realities in the country and the number of unsafe abortions showed the need for a political commitment to legal reform.

Organizers of an all-gay cruise in June said Moroccan officials had canceled what would have been the first visit of its kind to a Muslim country.

Reuters contributed to this report.

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