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SAVE PRINT

It's either a godsend or a 'boat of death': Dutch abortion ship docks in Guatemala

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Washington: Early Wednesday morning, a ship pulled into port in Quetzal, Guatemala. Depending on whom you ask, it's either a godsend or a "boat of death".

The vessel, run by the non-profit Women on Waves, travels the world offering free abortion services in places where the procedure is banned. The group brings women up to 10 weeks pregnant out to international waters, then provides them an abortion pill and a couple of hours of medical attention. (They also once sent abortion pills to Poland by drone.)



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The abortion ship in San Jose, Guatemala, last week. Photo: Women on Waves

The activists say their behaviour was perfectly legal, and that they have the permits to prove it.

"We respect religious beliefs but this [abortion] is a fundamental

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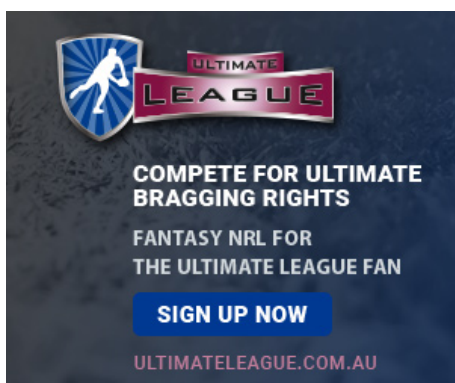
right in a democracy," spokeswoman Leticia Zevich told *La Hora*.



Detained: the ship's crew in Puerto San Jose, Guatemala. Photo: Women on Waves

The boat was in military custody on Friday with some of its seven crew members still aboard, after landing at a private pier at the Port of San Jose, 120 km south of the capital, Zenevich said.

The last time it took to the sea, in 2012, the group was barred from entering a Moroccan port.



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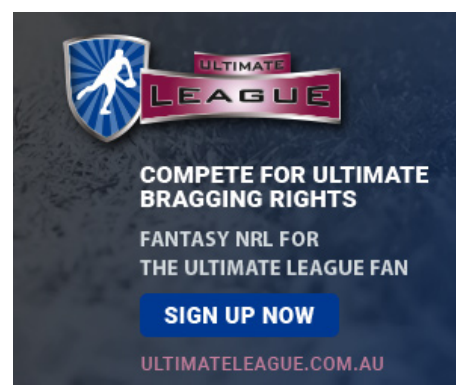
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But in Guatemala, a Catholic country where abortion is banned except to save a mother's life, the outcry was ferocious, and swift. On the orders of the President, Jimmy Morales, the country's army detained the ship. They also kept women from boarding. The army said it was defending "human life and the laws of our country".

"It's a sin. Why don't you go to Holland and kill children over there? Go to Holland. Why come to Guatemala? We are already cursed enough in Guatemala, we don't need more," anti-abortion activist Marleni Arias told reporters.





Dr Rebecca Gomperts, right, director of Women on Waves, was denied entry at the pier in Guatemala. Photo: Women on Waves

In a study from 2006, the Guttmacher Institute found that 65,000 illegal abortions were performed in Guatemala every year.

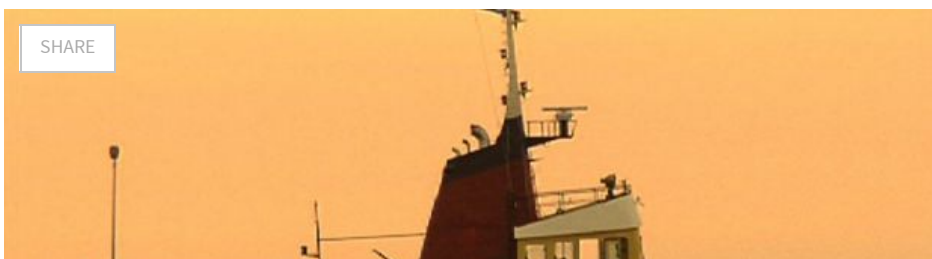
"Our problem is the same as it is anywhere where abortion is illegal: women seek help from people who don't have the skills or training to perform abortions," Carlos Vasquez, a Guatemalan gynecologist, told *The Guardian*. "It's incredibly dangerous."



A Dutch ship leased by Women on Waves, leaves for Dublin, Ireland, in 2001, carrying a shipping container outfitted with medical facilities to perform abortions. Photo: AP

The question of abortion access, though, is just a small part of a larger fight about women's health. The country has some of the youngest mothers in the world (5100 girls under 15 became pregnant in 2015), and one of the highest maternal birthrates. As *The Guardian* explains, "cultural practices, endemic violence and the hold of the Catholic church over decisions on reproductive health make girls in Guatemala easy prey for abuse and vulnerable to early pregnancy."

One woman, Lillian, had been raped continuously by her mother's uncle. She got pregnant at 11, immediately after her first period.





An earlier version of the abortion ship in international waters off Poland in a scene from the TV documentary 'The Cutting Edge'. Photo: Supplied

"I was afraid to tell my family, I believed that what had happened was my fault," she told the paper. She didn't see a doctor until she was six months pregnant.

The country has taken some steps to protect its girls. In 2009, it passed a law defining all sex with a girl under 14 as rape. Starting in 2012, every hospital and maternity ward must report any birth by a female under 15.

But these measures aren't nearly enough to address the epidemic of sexual violence and lack of health education. Two women are killed due to sexual violence there every day, according to the United Nations.

Nearly 25 per cent of all births in Guatemala are among teenage mothers; 90 per cent of pregnancies among Guatemalan girls under 14 involved relatives. Nearly a third involved rape by a father.

And there is little sexual education, because the powerful Catholic Church is fiercely opposed. One teenager, Heidi, who lives with her parents and 11 siblings in a ramshackle house in Jalapa, said: "I was hanging out on the street when I bumped into this guy. He told me, 'I want to be your boyfriend'. I said 'yes', and then I became pregnant. That's all I know."

Washington Post

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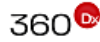
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