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Morocco bars visit by Dutch abortion rights ship

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By [Souhail Karam](#) and [Sara Webb](#)

RABAT/AMSTERDAM (Reuters) - Morocco on Thursday barred Dutch abortion rights activists 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.

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

Earlier on 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.

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 organisers 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).

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.

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.

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 organisers 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.

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

(Editing by Mark Heinrich)

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