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# Guatemala orders expulsion of ship and crew who offer free abortions in international waters

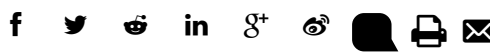
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Guatemala's immigration office has ordered the expulsion of a ship run by a Dutch non-profit organisation that performs free abortions on-board in international waters.

The office said that it was also expelling the crew of the ship operated by Women on Waves, which travels the globe offering abortion services to women in countries where the procedure was illegal.

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 last time they took to the sea, in 2012, they were barred from entering a Moroccan port.

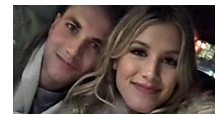


Guatemalan law prohibits abortion and allows the government to expel foreigners based on perceived risks to national interests, national security or public safety.

Earlier, the Guatemalan military had prevented the group from picking up women for the procedure in the Pacific port of Quetzal, where the ship is located. The military said it was under instructions from President Jimmy Morales to not allow the activity.

Earlier, Women on Waves spokeswoman Leticia Zenevich said they selected Guatemala as the first country they visited in Latin America because of the strength of its women's organisations.

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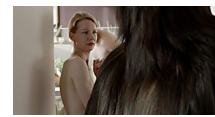
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The activists say their behaviour is perfectly legal, and that they have the permits to prove it.

“We respect religious beliefs but this [abortion] is a fundamental right in a democracy,” Zevich said.

In a blog post, the group said it was appealing the expulsion order and had not committed any illegal act.

In a study from 2006, the Guttmacher Institute found that 65,000 illegal abortions are 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.”

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.

“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, they 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.

*Associated Press, Washington Post*

***This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as: Abortion ship expelled, military deployed to port***

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