

Abortion campaigners' boat turned away from Moroccan port

Women on Waves, a Dutch activist group that offers advice and information, was refused access to enter the port of Smir

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The Women on Waves boat attempted to dock in the port of Smir, but was refused access. Photograph: Paul Schemm/AP

Moroccan authorities on Thursday prevented a Dutch abortion-rights campaign group from sailing into the port of Smir.

The group, Women on Waves, offers medical abortions and advice from boats anchored in international waters near countries where abortion is illegal.

Moroccan protesters, some in conservative Muslim robes and headscarves, carried pictures of bloody embryos while shouting "terrorist" and "assassin" at the group's leader, Rebecca Gomperts, in the coastal town of Smir.

As they tried to get closer to the activist, shouting and waving their arms, police pushed back the protesters and Gomperts was escorted away for her own protection.

She was in Smir to greet a Dutch ship promoting access to and awareness about abortions. Before its scheduled arrival, Moroccan authorities closed the port.

A government official at the port, who refused to be identified, said it was sealed for "military manoeuvres", but did not elaborate. A naval vessel and an inflatable motor boat was patrolling the harbour, which was filled with recreational yachts.

The Women on Waves boat was aiming for its first landfall in a Muslim country. It was invited to Morocco by a local women's rights organisation seeking the legalisation of abortion in the north African kingdom. The Moroccan government, however, says the boat did not have permission to arrive. Abortion is illegal in most cases in Morocco and it also is forbidden to give out information about such procedures.

However, the morning after pill is available in Moroccan pharmacies. Activist Marlies Schellekens said the boat and a hotline set up by the group will explain how medication available in Morocco can be safely used to end early pregnancies.

According to activists, 600-800 abortions are performed illegally every day in Morocco, with only 250 of them by licensed practitioners.

Founded in 1999, the Women on Waves organisation seeks to spread information about safe abortions through medication. It has previously angered authorities in conservative Catholic countries, where abortion is also often frowned upon.

Women can be counselled or provided with abortion medication on the ship outside the territorial waters of the countries that outlaw the procedure. The ship has carried out campaigns in Ireland, Poland and Spain, but was banned from entering Portugal's waters in 2004.

At the Moroccan protest on Thursday, 23-year-old Abdessamad Zilali, 23, said: "We are here because we cannot accept these values, the values of massacre."

Gomperts said the boat's work is important to raise awareness. "When the ship goes, we hope women will have the information to get abortions themselves."