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Morocco escorts 'abortion boat' from its waters

Rabat says Dutch boat that has left Smir harbour is diversion created to distract media attention from failure of real abortion ship to reach its planned destination.

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By Omar Brouksy - SMIR, Morocco

An 11-metre yacht dubbed the Dutch "abortion boat," which was due to provide free treatment to women in Morocco, was escorted from Moroccan territorial waters Thursday, amid competing claims about its authenticity.

Women on Waves, the Dutch group organising the controversial trip, said they denied access to the boat that was docked in the Moroccan harbour of Smir for "several days," after having said that it was due to arrive on Thursday.

The campaign group said the authorities searched the boat, and despite the fact that "no laws were broken... (and) they did not find anything incriminating," the ship was escorted from the harbour by the navy.



'The vessel at Smir Marina was in fact just a yacht, measuring 11 metres by three metres'

The interior ministry confirmed that the Dutch boat had left the harbour. But it said it was a diversion, created to distract media attention from the failure of the real abortion ship to reach its planned destination.

The vessel at Smir Marina was in fact "just a yacht, measuring 11 metres by three metres, with two Dutch citizens on board, which arrived... on September 2 while on a cruise," the ministry said in a statement.

"The two Dutch citizens raised a banner on Thursday afternoon in a sign of solidarity with the boat in question, to try to deflect the media attention from, and cover up the failure of this operation," it added.

Women on Waves, which claimed earlier that the Moroccan navy was blocking the arrival of the so-called abortion ship, said the purpose of the visit was to help women induce "safe legal medical abortions" by offering medication and advice.

It was to be the first such trip to a Muslim country.

Abortion is illegal in Morocco, a relatively conservative Muslim society, and the health ministry

had said that the ship was not authorised to operate on its territory, calling on the relevant authorities to prevent it from doing so.

At midday, up to 300 people gathered at Smir to protest against the visit, according to an AFP journalist.

The demonstrators shouted slogans and waved banners, which read: "Life is a divine gift that must be preserved," and "Abortion is an attack on the right to life," the official MAP news agency reported.

In the past 11 years, a Women on Waves ship has visited Ireland, Poland, Portugal and Spain, sparking protests in each country from pro-life groups.

The AFP journalist confirmed that the security forces, deployed in Smir since early morning, were restricting access to the harbour, which lies in the Mediterranean, around 40 kilometres (25 miles) east of Tangier.

The Dutch NGO estimates that between 600 and 800 illegal abortions take place every day in Morocco, but only around 200 of them are done properly, with most women resorting to cheap, unsanitary methods that put their lives at risk.

Rebecca Gomperts, the group's founder, said illegal abortions cause the deaths of 78 Moroccan women each year on average, citing statistics provided by the World Health Organisation.

Moroccan pro-life groups dispute the figures, and throughout the week ordinary Moroccans have voiced strong opposition to the Women on Waves visit, which local youth group the Alternative Movement for Individual Liberties helped to organise.

The activists say the ship will stay near Morocco while they plan their next move.