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## Abortion yacht sails around closed Moroccan port

By PAUL SCHEMM

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SMIR, Morocco (AP) — Women’s rights activists sailed a sailboat around a harbor in northern Morocco on Thursday to raise awareness about abortion, despite officials’ attempts to seal the port and anti-abortion protests on land against the group.

The small yacht was in sharp contrast to earlier reports from organizers, who had claimed that a large ship offering abortion information and services was on its way Thursday from the Netherlands. In response, Moroccan police sealed the port for what they called “military maneuvers” and denied journalists access.

But in the afternoon, activists from Women on Waves, the Dutch group behind the boat, admitted they already had stationed a sailboat in the port several days ago, fearing that authorities would close the port. And that sailboat took off around the harbor in the Mediterranean coastal town of Smir with banners promoting abortion.

On land, about 200 protesters, some in conservative Muslim robes and headscarves, carried pictures of bloody embryos and shouted “Terrorist!” and “Assassin!” at Rebecca Gomperts, founder of the Women on Waves.

As some protesters tried to get close to the Gomperts, shouting and waving their arms, police pushed them back and she was escorted away for her own protection.

“We are here because we cannot accept these values, the values of massacre,” 23-year-old protester Abdessamad Zilali said Thursday.

The Women on Waves boat was supposed to be making its first landfall in a Muslim country. It was invited to Morocco by a local women’s rights group seeking the legalization of abortion in this North African kingdom.

The Moroccan government says the boat did not have permission to come.

Abortion is illegal in most cases in Morocco and it also is forbidden to give out information about it. However, the so-called 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.

Founded in 1999, the Women on Waves group seeks to spread information about safe medical abortions through medication and has previously angered authorities in conservative Catholic countries.

The group has carried out campaigns offering information about abortion in Ireland, Poland and Spain and was banned from entering Portugal’s waters in 2004.

Gomperts said the sailboat’s work was important to raise awareness.

“When the ship goes, we hope women will have the information to get abortions themselves,” she said.

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