

Morocco Says Incoming Abortion Ship Illegal

by THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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RABAT, Morocco (AP) — Moroccan authorities said Wednesday that a Dutch ship promoting legal abortions set to dock in Morocco is operating outside the law and could possibly be stopped before arriving at a northern Mediterranean port.

The Dutch ship, which promotes safe and legal abortions worldwide, was invited by a Moroccan women's group to raise awareness in the struggle to legalize abortions, which are not allowed in this conservative Muslim country. It is scheduled to arrive at the port of Smir on Thursday.

It would be the "Women on Waves" boat's first landfall in a Muslim country.

"We haven't been informed about the arrival of this boat and from a security standpoint. It's a boat we don't know or why it is coming, so I don't see what we can do," Minister of Interior Mohend Laenser told The Associated Press.

Minister of Education Lahcen Daoudi added that any boat coming to Morocco had to respect its laws. "The people charged with applying the law will apply it on everything to do with the boat," he said.

According to a statement by the organization, the ship can provide women with safe and legal abortions under Dutch law in international waters until the six-and-a-half week of pregnancy.

The organization said it had set up a hotline for Moroccan women to give information about abortion, including locally available pharmaceuticals that can be safely used to perform abortions at home.

"There are between 600 and 800 abortions a day in Morocco, that's an enormous amount," said Ibtissame Lachgar, a member of MALI (Alternative Movement for Individual Liberties), the group that invited the boat. "We want to legalize abortion, to condemn this law that destroys freedom, that we find criminal."

The Moroccan Health Ministry issued a statement that if the people on the boat were intending to perform operations, they would be in violation of the law. "The Ministry of Health ... was never informed of this event and has not authorized any party or doctor, not residing in Morocco, to carry out this medical procedure," it said.

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

Women can be counseled or provided abortion medication on the ship outside the territorial waters of the countries outlawing the procedure.

The ship has carried out campaigns in Ireland, Poland and Spain. It was banned from entering Portugal's waters in 2004.

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