



## **Morocco moves to block Dutch 'abortion ship'**

**Group which operates vessel provides advice from international waters near countries where abortion is illegal.**

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Women on Waves provides abortions and advice from boats anchored in international waters [AFP] The Moroccan navy has blocked the port of Smir in which a controversial Dutch "abortion ship" was due to dock.

The group behind the ship, Women on Waves, provides abortions and advice from boats anchored in international waters near countries where abortion is illegal.

"They have blocked the harbour. We can see a big warship in front of the harbour on Thursday," Gunilla Kleiverga, a gynaecologist, told the AFP news agency by phone from an apartment in Smir, 40km east of Tangier, on Thursday.

"We're making an alternative plan."

Women on Waves has said it was invited to Morocco by a youth group called Alternative Movement for Individual Freedoms to inform women about how to induce "safe legal medical abortions," offer the necessary medication and start a discussion on legalising the practice in Morocco.

But Kleiverga insisted that the boat would not counsel or treat women in Morocco, hinting that it might transport women outside Morocco's maritime borders before doing so.

"We are only treating women in international waters. We're on a Dutch ship, where Dutch law applies. Of course we (will) adhere to Moroccan law, and we're not going to offer abortions in Morocco," she said.

They have already set up a hotline.

### **Government opposition**

Kleiverga said that, despite being illegal, around 700 abortions take place in Morocco every day, many of them exposing the women to dangerous and sometimes fatal treatment.

In the first government reaction to the planned trip, the health ministry said on Wednesday the ship was not authorised to operate in Morocco and called on the relevant authorities to prevent it from doing so.

"The ministry ... has never been informed of this event and has not authorised any non-resident party or doctor in Morocco to carry out this medical intervention," it said.

"The ministry calls on the relevant authorities to do what is necessary to ensure that the law is applied."

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.

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

But Moroccan pro-life groups dispute those figures.

Ordinary Moroccans have voiced strong opposition to the visit.

"Moroccan law forbids abortion. Moroccan religious identity says it is forbidden and so does Islam. So the government cannot allow this ship to come to Morocco," Abdelmalik Zaza, a lawyer, was quoted as saying in *Al-Tajdid*, the newspaper of ruling Islamist PJD party.

Source: Agencies