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Libya: Amnesty International welcomes release of medics

The release of six foreign medical workers today is a very welcome move that brings an end to a case that has been riddled with injustice and caused enormous suffering to all involved -- the six medics who were twice sentenced to death and the families of children who became infected with HIV at a Benghazi hospital.

"This is a welcome decision on the part of the Libyan authorities," said Malcolm Smart, Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme. "They should now proceed to implementing much-needed reforms to the criminal justice system to ensure that nothing like this can ever happen again in Libya."

The release of the medics -- five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor who was given Bulgarian citizenship last month -- was reportedly sealed following a deal struck between Libya and the EU to improve ties. Formally, the medics were transferred to Bulgaria by Libya under a prisoner exchange agreement between the two countries and then pardoned soon after their arrival by Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov.

The release follows a decision last week by Libya's Supreme Council of Judicial Bodies to commute the death sentences that had originally been imposed on the medics in 2004 after they were convicted of deliberately infecting over 400 Libyan children with HIV.

The six consistently denied the charge and allege that they were tortured in detention to make them "confess". Their first death sentence was overturned on appeal by the Supreme Court, but they were again convicted and sentenced to death after a second trial in 2006. Negotiations, in which the Gaddafi Development Foundation, headed by one of Libyan leader Mu'ammarr al-Gaddafi's sons, reportedly played a key role, resulted in agreement that the families of the children infected with HIV should benefit financially from an international fund in return for the death sentences against the doctor and nurses being commuted.

Amnesty International welcomed the commutation of the death sentences last week but criticized the life prison terms that were substituted and reiterated its appeal for the medics to be released and reunited with their families.

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