

Libya: Concerns about health professionals' trial

Amnesty International fears that 16 health professionals on trial in Libya may receive the death penalty. The defendants are accused of infecting nearly 400 children with the HIV virus, while in a Libyan hospital. According to the Libyan authorities 23 of these children had died by the end of 1999. The charges are formulated under three articles of the Libyan Penal Code which prescribe the death sentence.

The organization's concerns are heightened by the fact that the defendants are alleged to have been tortured and that there have been serious irregularities in their pre-trial proceedings.

The trial of the nine Libyans and seven foreign health professionals, including one Palestinian and six Bulgarians, was formally opened on 7 February in Tripoli, before a People's Court but the hearings has been postponed on three occasions. The next hearing is now scheduled for 17 September 2000.

The defendants were arrested in January 1999, and have been held for about 10 months without access to the outside world, relatives or legal representatives. The foreign nationals on trial were only allowed access to defence lawyers after the opening of the trial. In mid-May 2000 the Libyan defence lawyer for the Bulgarian defendants told the media that he had only met his clients on two occasions.

The Libyan defence lawyer also reported that two Bulgarian defendants and the Palestinian defendant claimed that their confessions had been obtained under duress. Earlier, Bulgarian officials complained that the Libyan authorities have not reacted to their call to investigate the defendant's allegations of having been forced into false confessions.

Amnesty International calls on the Libyan authorities to conduct impartial and prompt investigations into the allegations of ill-treatment and torture of the defendants and ensure that they have adequate access to their relatives, legal representatives and doctors.

"The Libyan authorities should ensure that the defendants are tried according to international standards of fair trial," Amnesty International said, "And give assurances that the defendants will not be sentenced to death."

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