

Compensation Debate Over Bulgarian Nurses

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Accused of infecting hundreds of children with HIV, the nurses languish on Libyan death row as their fate is discussed at home.

As five Bulgarian nurses sentenced to death in Libya for deliberately infecting 400 children with HIV contaminated blood await their final appeal, opinion at home is split on how the country's new socialist-led government should handle the crisis.

Some say the government should consider Libyan demands that compensation be paid to the families of the children, as other efforts have so far proved fruitless.

But there are those who point out that negotiation with the parents would almost impossible as they are not united, with some happy to talk and others insisting the women be executed.

Kristiana Vulcheva, Nasya Nenova, Snezhana Dimitrova, Valentina Siropulo and Valya Cherveniyashka were sentenced to death in May 2004 following an HIV outbreak at a hospital in the eastern city of Benghazi. Another man, Doctor Zdravko Georgiev, was jailed for four years but later released, though is unable to leave the country and now lives at the Bulgarian embassy in Tripoli.

International experts testified at the trial of the medical staff that the infections were caused by poor hygiene at the hospital and had spread before their arrival. Around 50 have now died, fuelling outrage in Libya.

Libyan judges accepted the government line that the health care workers were plotting against the Libyan state on the orders of the CIA and the Israeli intelligence service Mossad.

Appeals from the European Union and the United States have so far been ineffective, though Bulgarian diplomatic sources insist discussions are continuing in the run-up to the November 15 Supreme Court hearing. Analysts say if Libya's top court confirms the sentence, it may then be impossible to save the nurses.

Eager to overcome its international isolation and put an end to the process which has been rumbling on for more than six years, Libya hurried to renew its demands for compensation on the first day Bulgaria's new government took power.

Foreign Minister Ivailo Kalfin, however, rejected the payment as "blood money" - repeating his predecessor's position who feared offering compensation would amount to admitting guilt. He also argued that even if an agreement were reached with the parents it would bring with it no guarantee of amnesty for the nurses.

Valdimir Chukov, an expert on the Arabic world who has closely followed the case, thinks the government is making a mistake.

He said Bulgaria should negotiate with the parents, and not waste time attempting to prove their innocence. Relying on the Libyan justice system and the international community with its numerous other

priorities is a mistake, said Chukov, adding the special relationship that supposedly exists between Bulgaria's socialists and the Libyans is of no help in this situation.

Negotiating would increase the possibility that the nurses would receive lighter sentences and potentially allow them to be transferred to a Bulgarian prison, he said.

Mirolyuba Benatova, a journalist from bTV, takes the opposite view, saying even if Bulgaria agrees to negotiate it is unclear whom they would talk to as the parents are split on exactly what they want.

Those involved say it is the Libyan state, not the parents, which is driving the case against the nurses, an opinion shared by Zdravko Georgiev.

"These people [the parents] have never thought we are guilty. For years they were coming to our nurses for support. There are representatives of the state, who are indoctrinating them," he told Balkan Crisis Report, BCR.

"The whole world knows we are innocent, and this is the most important to me."

Chukov believes the Bulgarian are in a perilous situation. "Gadaffi will never step back," he said. "He is proud of Libya's justice and is convinced it is the best one possible, so it is a matter of national pride."

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