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International Human Rights Groups Visit Bulgarian Nurses Imprisoned in Libya and Renew Call for Their Release Despite Recent Rebuff by Libyan Leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi

Physicians for Human Rights and the International Federation of Health and Human Rights Organisations (PHR/IFHHRO) continue to seek the release of five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian physician sentenced to death in May 2004 on charges of infecting over 400 children with HIV at Benghazi hospital. The groups call on Libya to fully investigate conditions at al-Fateh Children's Hospital where the 400 children were infected and urge the government to cease blaming foreigners for a domestic health crisis.

"The infection of over 400 children with HIV is a terrible tragedy and everything must be done to assure proper care and treatment for these children. However, this situation requires immediate attention to address challenges within Libya's health care system by conducting an investigation of health care conditions at hospitals," said Dr. Joost Den Otter, a physician and prison health expert affiliated with PHR/IFHHRO, who visited the nurses in their Tripoli jail in February 2005.

Dr. Den Otter, conducted a four-day medical assessment of prisoners in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. Dr. Den Otter met with imprisoned political dissident Fathi el-Jahmi (see www.phrusa.org or www.ifhhro.org) and visited with the five Bulgarian nurses at Tripoli's Correctional Institute for Women on February 22, 2005 (Kristiana Malinova Valcheva, Nasya Stojcheva Nenova, Valentina Manolova Siropulo, Valya Georgieva Chervenashka, and Snezhanka Ivanova Dimitrova). He did not meet with Ashraf Ahmad Jum'a, the Palestinian doctor.

The health professionals are reportedly scheduled to appear before Libya's Supreme Court on May 31. Mr. Gaddafi stated at a recent Arab League summit in Algiers that the defendants would not be set free.

The imprisoned nurses informed Dr. Den Otter that each one of them is suffering from a chronic illness, though none of them receives regular medical care. They complained that many scheduled visits are often postponed indiscriminately for one or more weeks. At the time of their visit with Dr. Den Otter, the nurses were awaiting a visit from a dentist. When medical visits do occur, there is rarely if ever any follow-up. One of the nurses mentioned that she had been suffering from a serious eye problem for at least three months. At the time of Dr. Den Otter's visit, she had still not seen an ophthalmologist. Others complained of kidney, heart, and dental ailments without appropriate treatment.

Musculoskeletal disorders were a prominent concern for the nurses, problems they attributed in part to their age, but more likely to their lack of exercise. The nurses told Dr. Den Otter that they were allowed to leave their cells only twice a week for one hour. When they are permitted to leave, they can only walk on their patio, which is a few square meters. "The only thing we are allowed to do here is eat and sleep," stated one nurse. They described arthritis-like symptoms (swelling, pain, restriction of movements). Their request for more freedom of movement inside their prison compound has gone unheeded as has their request for a visit with a physical therapist.

In May 2004, dozens of the world's leading virologists and AIDS doctors sent an open letter, organized by PHR, to Colonel Gaddafi protesting the death sentence of the health professionals. Signers included the co-discoverers of HIV, Professor Luc Montagnier and Dr. Robert Gallo, as well as virologist Dr. Ashley Haase, chair of University of Minnesota's Department of Microbiology. Professor Montagnier and Italian microbiologist Vittorio Colizzi sampled viruses from the infected children and determined that many of the victims had been infected with HIV before the arrival of the nurses and doctor in 1998. Furthermore, the presence of co-contaminants Hepatitis B and C suggests that the victims had been infected by unsanitary conditions at the hospital rather than by any deliberate action.

Since June 2003, the nurses have received regular, weekly visits from representatives of the Bulgarian Embassy, but they are unable to call the Embassy in advance to make any requests and are denied visits from a Bulgarian priest.

The conditions of confinement imposed on the five Bulgarian nurses violate the guidelines detailed in the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. According to the Standard Minimum Rules, "every prisoner who is not employed in outdoor work shall have at least one hour of suitable exercise in the open air daily if the weather permits." The Libyan Government has not met its requirements for medical care with respect to the nurses.

The visit with the nurses occurred only a few hours before Dr. Den Otter's departure from Libya, thereby limiting its length and scope. Dr. Den Otter was not able to interview the nurses in private. Libyan officials and security staff were present throughout the interview with four of the five nurses. Dr. Den Otter spoke briefly with the fifth nurse when he toured the prison grounds. Libyan officials told Dr. Den Otter that the nurses felt comfortable speaking in the presence of others. During the interview, however, the nurses conveyed that they were concerned by their lack of privacy, even when consulting health professionals.

PHR/IFHHRO reiterates its call for the release of the foreign health professionals sentenced to death in Libya. It has also pushed the Government to conduct a complete investigation into the conditions at al-Fateh Children's Hospital where the 400 children were infected. This situation requires immediate attention to address problems within the health infrastructure, which PHR has emphasized occur in many countries (see PHR's report: [HIV Transmission in Health Care Settings](#).)

Physicians for Human Rights

[Physicians for Human Rights \(PHR\)](#) advances health and dignity of all people by protecting human rights. As one of the original steering committee members of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, PHR shared the 1997 Nobel Peace

Prize. PHR's Health Action AIDS campaign mobilizes health professionals to support a comprehensive AIDS strategy and advocates for funds to combat the disease and researches the connection between human rights and AIDS.

International Federation of Health and Human Rights Organisations

The International Federation of Health and Human Rights Organisations (IFHHRO) was established as a network of organizations with similar human right agendas, upon an initiative of the Johannes Wier Foundation (the Netherlands) and Physicians for Human Rights in 1989. IFHHRO works to achieve rights based strategies toward the right to health for all. IFHHRO and its affiliated organizations have developed expertise in issues related to the right to health, patient's right, health and human right in times of political violence, human rights, forensic medicine and hunger strikes.