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## Libya firm on HIV death sentences

**Libya says that it will not bow to international pressure over death sentences passed on five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor.**

The group were sentenced by a court in Tripoli for knowingly infecting hundreds of Libyan children with HIV.

The sentences have drawn international criticism, while academic bodies have argued that the guilty verdicts run counter to scientific evidence.

But Libya's foreign minister said it was now up to Libya's Supreme Court.

"Libya will never deal with such pressure from any side - from America, from Europe, from anywhere," Abdurrahman Shalgham said.

**We urge the Libyan authorities to intervene at once**  
Statement from Bulgarian president and prime minister

"No-one can intervene in our justice - no-one. Even our leader, Colonel Gaddafi, can't intervene. That should be quite clear."

The group, all of whom deny the charges, were sentenced to death in 2004, but the Supreme Court quashed the ruling after protests over the fairness of the trial.

Defence lawyers said the medics would file an appeal against the new verdict with the Supreme Court within 60 days.

The medics have been in detention since 1999, during which time 52 of the 426 infected children have died of Aids.

**'Absurd sentences'**

20/12/2006

The decision was handed down by a court in the capital, Tripoli.

#### **SEVEN YEARS IN CUSTODY**

1999: Nineteen Bulgarian medical workers arrested at Benghazi hospital after outbreak of HIV/Aids among children

2000: Five Bulgarian women nurses and Bulgarian male doctor go on trial along with a Palestinian doctor

2004-05: Libya convicts and sentences the five nurses and Palestinian to death; retrial subsequently ordered

2006: The nurses and Palestinian doctor are convicted and sentenced to death again

Bulgarian officials quickly condemned the verdicts. A statement released jointly by Bulgarian President Georgy Parvanov and Prime Minister Sergey Stanishev called the court case "compromised".

"We urge the Libyan authorities to intervene at once, speedily review this ruling, overturn the absurd sentences and release the Bulgarian nurses and the Palestinian doctor," they said.

Bulgaria's parliamentary speaker, Georgi Pirinski, said that the sentencing was "an attempt to cover up the real culprits and the real reasons for the Aids outbreak".

EU Justice Commissioner Franco Frattini expressed his shock at the verdict, while the White House said it was "disappointed".

A spokesman for the UN human rights office said that there were "some very serious concerns about the fairness of the trial".

But parents of the infected children welcomed the news.

"Justice has been done. We are happy," Subhy Abdullah, whose daughter Mona, 7, died from Aids contracted at the hospital, told Reuters news agency. "They should be executed quickly."

#### **'Outbreak predated medics'**

The medics have protested their innocence throughout, retracting confessions that they said were obtained under torture and arguing that they are being made scapegoats for unhygienic hospitals.

The defence team told the court that the HIV virus was present in the hospital, in the town of Benghazi, before the nurses began working there in 1998.

Medical experts including the French co-discoverer of the HIV virus had testified on their behalf.

Oxford University in the UK said the verdict ran counter to findings by scientists from its Zoology Department.

A research team had concluded that "the subtype of HIV involved began infecting patients long before March 1998, the date the prosecution claims the crime began", a statement from the university said.

Libya has asked for 10m euros (£6.7m) compensation to be paid to each of the families of

victims, suggesting the death sentences could be commuted in return.

But Bulgaria has rejected the proposal, saying any payment would be seen as an admission of guilt.

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/6194325.stm>

Published: 2006/12/19 17:10:30 GMT

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