Firing Squad for Docs?

Libya’s leader plays Russian roulette with nation’s revamped rep by sentencing AIDS medics

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BENGHAZI, LIBYA, May 6, 2004—A pariah state due to such ’80s terrorist strikes as the downing of Pan Am flight 103, this impoverished desert nation undertook a face-lift last winter by abandoning its nuclear-weapons program. But head of state Mu’ammar Gadhafi may outrage world opinion once again with more “disarming” news: Today, a Libyan court sentenced five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doc to death by firing squad for allegedly intentionally infecting some 400 children with HIV in 1998. The parents, whose children were patients at a hospital where the medics worked, rejoiced at the ruling, which was immediately appealed.

Gadhafi, who in 2002 blamed U.S. and Israeli secret services for backing the accused in an HIV plot to destabilize Libya, has repeatedly dodged the most probable cause of transmission: inadequate infection control in hospitals. “Obviously, Libya is scapegoating these health officials instead of dealing with the real problem—poor health infrastructure due to a lack of resources” said Eileen Campbell of Physicians for Human Rights. “Libya’s not unique—probably 500,000 worldwide are infected yearly through reused needles and unclean blood screening.”

During the trial, Libya enlisted HIV discoverer Luc Montagnier, MD, to investigate. He found not only evidence that the children were infected *before* the foreigners were hired but many signs of a glaring lack of blood-screening protocol. His report fell on deaf ears, as did information that confessions were coaxed from the captives through torture. When the U.S. was quick to condemn the sentences, Libya shot back, “America has to be ashamed for what happened at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, instead of our verdict.”

At press time, officials worldwide were appealing to Gadhafi, who holds final sway over the appeal, to halt his squadron. Ready, aim, Libya-ration!

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