The Plot Sickens

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In the world according to Libyan president Mu'ammar Al-Gadhafi, the AIDS virus was created in a CIA test tube, carried to sub-Saharan Africa through stealth experiments and is now spreading in his secluded Muslim country because of six Bulgarian health workers, hired by either the U.S. or Israel, who infected 393 children in a plot to destabilize his regime.

The Bulgarian medical team -- five nurses and one doctor -- now faces the death penalty in a Libyan trial that has sparked outrage from the Bulgarian government and the global health community. According to a Libyan prosecutor, the workers confessed to injecting the children with HIV during the late '90s at a hospital in the coastal city of Benghazi.

But two of the nurses, kept in a locked cage during a trial in June, recanted their confessions, saying they were coerced through electric shocks and "every kind of torture known since the Middle Ages." In a defense backed by European AIDS experts, the nurses argue that the children were most likely infected through poor medical practices at the hospital, including the recycled use of unsterilized syringes. Efforts by the World Health Organization to identify the source of infections have been rebuffed.

Bulgarian officials had been trying for two years, through intense diplomatic pleas, to have the charges dropped. The pending verdict, which is expected this month, has threatened the long-standing relationship between the two self-described socialist countries. "Bulgaria will not accept a political lynch law with the six medics," Deputy Foreign Minister Marin Raikov said.

Foreign-affairs experts theorize that Colonel Gadhafi is using the case to retaliate against the recent conviction of a Libyan nationalist suspected of the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am plane over Scotland. Gadhafi cited the bombing trial, which took place on European soil, in a long-winded speech that cast a pall over the African AIDS summit in April.

"There is a serum which protects against AIDS," the colonel said after blaming the CIA for unleashing HIV. "But it will never be made public until capitalism decides that it has had enough wealth at the expense of our tragedy."

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