

23 March 2007

His Excellency Mu'ammar Abu Minyar al-Qadhafi
Leader of the Revolution
Office of the Leader of the Revolution
Tripoli
Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya
LIBYA

Your Excellency:

We the undersigned leading health professional associations in the United States are writing to urge you in the strongest terms to immediately release and exonerate the five Bulgarian nurses—Valya Cherveney, Snezhanka Dimitrova, Nasya Nenova, Valentina Siropulo, and Kristiana Valcheva—and Palestinian physician Ashraf Ahmad Jum'a who were sentenced to death on December 19, 2006 for “deliberately infecting” 426 children with HIV at Benghazi children’s hospital. This situation is tragic for the children who were infected with HIV and for the health professionals who have been unjustly imprisoned and now sentenced to death.

Repeated scientific studies, including a study published recently in the highly respected peer-reviewed journal *Nature*, indicate that the children were likely infected through the re-use of infected medical instruments and supplies, a frequent conduit of HIV in hospitals that fail to follow universal precautions. The evidence shows the strain of HIV with which the children are infected was spreading through the hospital before the accused nurses and doctor began working there. The court, however, refused to admit for consideration scientific evidence about the transmission of the disease—an unacceptable decision that questions the fairness of the judicial proceedings.

As health care professionals, we are sensitive to the suffering of the infected children and their families and call upon your government and others to ensure that the children will continue to receive high-quality medical care. However, blaming the foreign health workers for the infection of the children will not reverse their plight. Rather, it will turn a blind eye towards the real cause of the problem—inadequate and unsafe health systems, equipment, and procedures—thereby increasing the risk of other accidental HIV infections. Moreover, we are deeply concerned about the chilling effect this situation has on the willingness of people to enter the health professions and serve in areas where health care needs are great.

Many other countries, including China, Romania, and Kazakhstan, have also experienced widespread accidental HIV infection due to reused and unsterilized medical equipment. We urge you to acknowledge the need for use of universal precautions to keep patients and medical staff safe in Libyan medical facilities and ensure that universal precautions are in place at all medical facilities.

As the representatives of thousands of health care practitioners throughout the United States, we look through the lens of medicine, science, and public health and are deeply troubled that concrete scientific and medical evidence has been ignored. But we are also concerned with the human rights of colleagues everywhere, and are deeply disturbed that our health professional colleagues have been unjustly accused, seriously mistreated, and denied access to due process. We see no other just outcome of this case than the immediate release and exoneration of the nurses and physician, acknowledgement of scientific evidence, implementation of universal precaution programs in Libyan medical facilities, and on-going treatment of the infected children.

Sincerely yours,

American Medical Association

American College of Physicians

American Medical Student Association

Association of Nurses in AIDS Care

HIV Medicine Association

International Human Rights Committee of American Public Health Association

Physicians for Human Rights

Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America

Society of General Internal Medicine

World Federation of Public Health Associations

CC:

Dr. al-Baghdadi Ali al-Mahmudi, Secretary General of the General People's Committee
Abd-al-Rahman Mohamed Shalqam, Secretary of Foreign Liaison and International
Cooperation

Ali Umar al-Hasnawi, Secretary of the General People's Committee for Foreign Liaison and
International Cooperation

Ali Suleiman Aujali, Chargé d'Affaires, Libyan Embassy, Washington, D.C.