

United Nations: Landmark Meeting Denounces Rights Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity

Holy See Condemns Criminalization of Homosexual Conduct

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(New York, December 11) - A United Nations General Assembly panel that met this week broke new ground and helped build new momentum for ending human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity, a coalition of sponsoring nongovernmental organizations said today.

The meeting included discussion of discriminatory and draconian "anti-homosexuality" legislation currently before the Ugandan parliament, and of the role of American religious groups in promoting repression across Africa. In a groundbreaking move, a representative of the Holy See in the audience read a statement strongly condemning the criminalization of homosexual conduct.

The panel, held yesterday on the 61st anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, featured speakers from Honduras, India, the Philippines, and Zambia, as well as Uganda, where the proposed "anti-homosexuality law" shows the steady threat of government repression.

Sweden organized the panel in coalition with Argentina, Brazil, Croatia, France, the Netherlands, and Norway. It was sponsored by a group of six nongovernmental organizations that defend the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. The audience of 200 people included delegates from over 50 nations.

Ugandan lawmakers are currently debating the "anti-homosexuality" bill. While there were reports that the death-penalty provisions might be stripped from the bill, other punishments would remain that would drive many Ugandans underground or out of the country, participants said.

Speaking on the panel, Victor Mukasa, co-founder of Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) and program associate for the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), described how he was forced to leave Uganda following police brutality and raids on his home. He said that Uganda's "anti-homosexuality" bill reflects a pattern of state-sponsored homophobia spreading across the African continent.

"Lack of security, arbitrary arrests and detentions, violence, and killings of LGBT people have become the order of the day in Africa," said Mukasa. "Nothing can change as long as LGBT people live in fear for their safety when they claim their basic human rights."

The statement from the Holy See said it "opposes all forms of violence and unjust discrimination against homosexual persons, including discriminatory penal legislation which undermines the inherent dignity of the human person....[T]he murder and abuse of homosexual persons are to be confronted on all levels, especially when such violence is perpetrated by the State."

Also at the panel discussion, the Reverend Kapya Kaoma, an Anglican priest from Zambia who is project director for Political Research Associates (PRA) in Massachusetts, presented the group's new report, Globalizing the Culture Wars: U.S. Conservatives, African Churches, and Homophobia.

Kaoma said that many anti-LGBT attitudes across Africa are fueled by US groups actively exporting homophobia. He called on US religious figures who have been promoting hatred and fear of homosexuality in Africa to denounce the Uganda bill unequivocally, and support the human rights of all people regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Citing their moral responsibility to prevent violence, he also urged them to make such declarations in Africa, not just before US audiences.

Other panelists highlighted governments' complicity in prejudice and violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Indyra Mendoza Aguilar, coordinator of the Lésbica Feminista Cattrachas network in Honduras said that an atmosphere of impunity since the June coup in Honduras has meant spreading violence against already marginalized people.

"In Honduras, as in many countries, the state turns a blind eye to violence against our communities," said Mendoza Aguilar. "Today we issue a call for reforming our societies, free of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, free of impunity."

Vivek Divan, an Indian attorney and member of the team that led a successful legal challenge to India's colonial-era sodomy law, described the provision's insidious effects, promoting inequality, excusing violence, and permitting state intrusion into private lives. The Delhi High Court overturned the law this year in a landmark decision affirming diversity as a core value of the Indian state.

Speakers also stressed how torture, killings, and other grave abuses target people not just because of their sexualities, but because they look, dress, or act in ways that defy deeply rooted patriarchal norms for expressing masculinity and femininity.

"Now is the time to realize that diversity does not diminish our humanity," said Sass Sasot, co-founder of the Society of Transsexual Women of the Philippines (STRAP). "You want to be born, to live, and die with dignity - so do we! You want to live with authenticity - so do we!"

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To view a video of the panel in English, please visit:

<http://webcast.un.org/ramgen/ondemand/specialevents/2009/se091210pm2.rm>

For Spanish, please visit:

<http://webcast.un.org/ramgen/ondemand/specialevents/2009/se091210pm2-orig.rm>

The sponsoring organizations were:

[Arc International](#)

[COC Netherlands](#)

Global Advocates for Trans Equality (GATE)

[Human Rights Watch](#)

[International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission \(IGLHRC\)](#)

[International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Association \(ILGA\)](#)

report I have (from Justus Einfeld) is that there were delegates weeping at this speech, very unusual for this venue..

Sass Rogando Sasot: UN Speech - Reclaiming the lucidity of our hearts

ECOSOC Chamber, United Nations Headquarters, New York

Thursday, December 10th 2009 at 1.15 p.m. – 2.45 p.m

Let me begin by expressing my warmest gratitude to the Permanent Missions to the United Nations of Argentina, Brazil, Croatia, France, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, and to the coalition of non-government organizations defending the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. Thank you for making this event possible and for giving us this opportunity to contribute our voices to this ongoing conversation for change. Our esteemed participants, beautiful beings, and profound expressions of this Universe, a warm, vibrant, and dignified afternoon to each and every one of you!

Burned at stake. Strangled and hanged. Raped and shot and stabbed to death. Throats slashed. Left to bleed to death. These are just some of the ways transgender people were killed in different parts of the world, in different times in the history of humanity. These are just the tip, the violent tip, of the iceberg of our suffering. I can go on and on, reciting a litany of indignity upon indignity, but my time is not enough to name all the acts of atrocious cruelty that transgender people experience. But what is the point of counting the dead bodies of our fellow human beings, of narrating how we suffer, and of opposing violence against us if we don't challenge the root of our oppression?

The sincerity of our intention to address the human rights violations against transgender people rests upon the depth of our appreciation of human diversity and the breadth of our understanding of why transgender people suffer these indignities.

The root of our oppression is the belief that there is only one and only one way to be male or female. And this starts from our birth. Upon a quick look on our genitals, we are assigned into either male or female. This declaration is more than just a statement of what's between our legs. It is a prescription of how we should and must live our lives. It is a dictation of what we should think about ourselves, the roles we should play, the clothes we should wear, the way we should move, and the people with whom we should have romantic or erotic relationships. But the existence of people whose identities, bodies, and experiences do not conform to gender norms is a proof that this belief is wrong.

Nonetheless, even though the truth of human diversity is so evident and clear to us, we choose to hang on to our current beliefs about gender, a belief that rejects reality and forces people to live a lie. This is the belief that leads to attacks on our physical and mental integrity, to different forms of discrimination against us, and to our social marginalization. This is the belief that led to Joan of Arc to be burned at stake because she was cross-dressing. This is the belief that motivated the rape and murder of Brandon Teena on December 31, 1993. This is the belief that led to the stabbing to death of Ebru Soykan, a prominent transgender human rights activist in Turkey, on March 10, 2009. This is the belief that led to the arrest of 67 Filipino

workers in Saudi Arabia for cross-dressing in June this year. This is the belief that keeps the list of transgender people being harassed, killed, and violated growing year after year. And it is very unfortunate that our legal systems, religions, and cultures are being used to justify, glorify, and sanctify the violent expressions of this belief.

So we question: Is human life less precious than this belief? Is our right to life, to dignified existence, to liberty, and pursuit of happiness subservient to gender norms? This doesn't need a complicated answer. You want to be born, to live, and die with dignity – so do we! You want the freedom to express the uniqueness of the life force within you – so do we! You want to live with authenticity – so do we!

Now is the time that we realize that diversity does not diminish our humanity; that respecting diversity does not make us less human; that understanding and accepting our differences do not make us cruel. And in fact, history has shown us that denying and rejecting human variability is the one that has led us to inflict indignity upon indignity towards each other.

We are human beings of transgender experience. We are your children, your partners, your friends, your siblings, your students, your teachers, your workers, your citizens.

Let our lives delight in the same freedom of expression that you enjoy as you manifest to the outside world your unique and graceful selves.

Let us live together in the fertile ground of our common humanity for this is the ground where religion is not a motivation to hate but a way to appreciate the profound beauty and mysteries of life;

for this is the ground where laws are not tools to eliminate those who are different from us but are there to facilitate our harmonious relationship with each other;

for this is the ground where culture is not a channel to express the brutality of our limited perception but a means to express the nobility of our souls;

for this is the ground where the promise of the universality of human rights can be fulfilled!

And we will be in this ground if we let the sanity of our desires, the tenacity of our compassion, and above all, the lucidity of our hearts to reign in our lives.

Thank you!

Sass Rogando Sasot, transgender activist, Society of Transsexual Women of the Philippines (STRAP)

Link to UN Channel (You Tube): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrOc6CIQjtc>

Links to the entire webcast:

English: [http://webcast.un.org/ramgen/ondemand/s ... 1210pm2.rm](http://webcast.un.org/ramgen/ondemand/s...1210pm2.rm)

Spanish: [http://webcast.un.org/ramgen/ondemand/s ... m2-orig.rm](http://webcast.un.org/ramgen/ondemand/s...m2-orig.rm)

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