

Homophobia reaching `dangerous levels` across Africa: rights group

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USPA News - Homophobia across sub-Saharan Africa is reaching "dangerous levels," as evidenced by a rising number of homophobic attacks and the increasing number of countries which have passed laws that criminalize same-sex relationships, human rights activists said Tuesday. Amnesty International reported the findings in a report which documents the discrimination faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersex (LGBTI) people across sub-Saharan Africa.

It described the rising levels of homophobia on the continent as "dangerous" and urged immediate action to tackle the problem. "These attacks - sometimes deadly - must be stopped. No one should be beaten or killed because of who they are attracted to or intimately involved with," said Widney Brown, the group's director of Law and Policy. "In too many cases these attacks on individuals and groups are being fuelled by key politicians and religious leaders who should be using their position to fight discrimination and promote equality." Often characterized as "unnatural carnal acts" or "acts against the order of nature," homosexuality is currently a crime in 38 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. South Sudan and Burundi have introduced anti-homosexuality laws over the past five years, and Uganda, Liberia and Nigeria are currently considering bills to increase existing penalties. The report, entitled "Making Love a Crime," documented cases in Cameroon where people are regularly arrested after being denounced to the authorities as being gay or lesbian - based on their appearance or conjecture, rather than evidence. Some individuals accused of homosexuality have been imprisoned for three years without trial or charge. In one case in Cameroon in March 2011, a man was arrested and later sentenced to three years in prison on charges of homosexuality and attempted homosexuality. He told Amnesty International that he had suffered sexual assault and malnutrition while in prison, and he required a hernia operation upon release. "This was a case where the accused was convicted on the basis of sending a text message to another man. This was the first time that a person has been convicted on the basis of a text message," said Michel Togue, a human rights defender and lawyer who defends LGBTI people in Cameroon. "There have been no cases where any men have been caught in the act, even though Article 347 requires this. The homophobia of judges is a real problem," Togue said. "A regular argument by the prosecuting lawyers is that the men were `caught in the act,` but the court does not want to read the file in detail to see if this is true." Other former detainees from Cameroon told Amnesty International about being beaten while in custody and subjected to invasive procedures. In one case, a 46-year-old man was arrested after neighbors told police he was gay on the basis of receiving tourists at his home, and he was later subjected to a forced anal examination to find `proof` of anal sex. But even in countries where laws against homosexuality are not enforced, their existence provides opportunities for abuse by both police and members of the public. In Kenya, police officers used laws against same-sex relations to elicit bribes while extortionists used such laws to demand money or goods in exchange for not revealing real or made-up private details to the media, community or police. "The very existence of laws criminalizing same-sex relations - whether they are enforced or not - sends a toxic message that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are criminals and have no rights. These poisonous laws must be repealed and the human rights of all Africans upheld," Brown said. In addition to imprisonment, threats and violence, political and religious opposition to LGBTI rights has also become more visible and vocal on the continent. In some African countries, political leaders have used sexual orientation issues to distract from other human rights problems such as rampant discrimination and violence against women, corruption and lack of media freedoms. Since 2009, politicians in Uganda have re-introduced the Anti-Homosexuality Bill to parliament several times, usually coinciding with periods of widespread unrest about rising fuel and food prices. The bill seeks to impose the death penalty for `aggravated` homosexuality and would criminalize anyone who does not report LGBTI people to the authorities. In other instances in sub-Saharan Africa, news media organizations have helped stir up and inflame hostility towards homosexuals. A photograph of LGBTI activist David Kato was printed on the front page of Rolling Stone magazine in Uganda in 2010, accompanied by a headline reading: "Hang them." He was murdered at his home just weeks later. In South Africa, the only African country where same-sex marriage has been legalized, Amnesty International documented a persistently high number of rapes and murders against the LGBTI community. Between June and November 2012, at least seven people, five of them lesbians, were murdered in what appeared to be targeted violence related to their sexual orientation or gender identity. "It is time that African states stopped demonizing individuals because of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Human rights are about the dignity and equality of all people," Brown said. "As the chorus for recognition grows stronger and stronger, African states have to stop denying that homophobia is a human rights issue and recognize that LGBTI rights are an integral part of the human rights struggle. It is their responsibility to protect, not persecute."

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