

Ugandan LGBT Arrested at International HIV/AIDS Meeting

Human Rights Groups Demand Immediate Release

Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) today condemned the arrests of three Ugandan LGBT activists and called for their immediate and unconditional release. The three --Onziema Patience, (an FTM transgender, 28), Valentine Kalende (female, age 27) and Auf (male, age 26)--were arrested yesterday morning by the Uganda Police Force at the 2008 HIV/AIDS Implementers' Meeting currently taking place in Kampala, Uganda. Along with other LGBT and HIV and AIDS activists, they were peacefully protesting statements made by a Ugandan government official that no funds would be directed toward HIV programs targeting men who have sex with men. SMUG and IGLHRC have fears for the safety of the three activists.

On 2 May 2008, Kihumuro Apuuli, Director General of the Uganda AIDS Commission, stated that "gays are one of the drivers of HIV in Uganda, but because of meagre resources we cannot direct our programmes at them at this time." The SMUG activists staged a peaceful protest at the HIV Implementers meeting to protest the Minister's statements and gross neglect on the part of the Ugandan government in responding to a growing HIV epidemic among the country's LGBT community. They were arrested and detained at the Jinja Road Police Station immediately after taking the stage at the meeting, distributing leaflets and holding up small placards demanding attention to HIV vulnerability among LGBT.

"Today I realized how dangerous it is for us LGBTI people to express our constitutional rights," said Frank Mugisha, Co-Chairperson of SMUG. "I am worried about my comrades who are in police custody."

According to a recent report by the University of Nairobi and the Population Council, gay men in neighboring Kenya have a sero prevalence rate of 26%. Twenty-six years since the beginning of the epidemic Uganda hasn't implemented a single program to prevent transmission of HIV among men who have sex with men in the East African nation.

"The remarks made by the head of the AIDS Commission were very disturbing to members of the LGBT community," said Kasha Jacqueline, Chairperson of Freedom and Roam Uganda, a lesbian organization in Uganda. "If they want us to die, let them ask themselves if they wish themselves the same. Excluding us is just going to make the situation worse."

The HIV Implementers' Meeting is an annual event described as an opportunity for HIV program implementers to share lessons learned and best practices in the scale-up of HIV/AIDS programs. It is co-sponsored by the President's Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), UNAIDS, the World Bank, the Global Fund, UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Global Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (GNP+). IGLHRC is also requesting that the co-sponsors of the Implementers' Meeting contact the Ugandan Government to demand the release of these activists.

"Gay men and lesbians are not 'drivers of disease'," said Paula Ettelbrick, Executive Director of IGLHRC. "Homophobia drives HIV. Silence drives HIV."

In November 2004, the Ugandan government fined a local broadcaster, Radio Simba for airing a program that discussed anti-gay discrimination and the need for HIV/AIDS Services for lesbians and gay men. The government claimed that Radio Simba had violated federal law promoting broadcasting that is contrary to "public morality".