

January 13, 2010

Dear Members of Congress,

As leaders of organizations representing a wide range of faiths, we share the central tenet that every human being is created in the image of God. It is because of this fundamental belief that we decry the alarming increase in human rights violations targeting sexual orientation and gender identity, including, most recently, the anti-homosexuality legislation now under debate in Uganda.

As American faith leaders, we ask you to oppose the criminalization of, and violence toward, LGBT communities and individuals by signing on to Congressional letters to President Barack Obama and Ugandan President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni currently being circulated by the House of Representatives Equality Caucus, chaired by Representatives Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Jared Polis (D-CO) and Barney Frank (D-MA). A similar letter is being circulated by Senator Benjamin Cardin (D-MD) in the Senate.

The proposed Uganda “Anti-Homosexuality Bill” criminalizes homosexuality and expands the penal code to punish “aggravated homosexuality,” including activity by “serial offenders” or those who are HIV positive. Among its many cruel provisions, a person who fails to report within 24 hours the identity of anyone perceived to be LGBT or who supports the human rights of LGBT individuals would be subject to up to three years imprisonment. The bill also criminalizes the “promotion of homosexuality” which includes providing funding to organizations that serve LGBT people. This measure would severely threaten HIV/AIDS prevention, services and treatment, making the work of groups seeking to prevent the spread of HIV nearly impossible. Local and international pressure has led the Ugandan government to a non-binding verbal agreement to remove the death penalty and life imprisonment for those convicted of homosexual acts from the bill. However, with or without the death penalty provision, the legislation remains one of the most abhorrent manifestations of a worldwide escalation of violence and human rights violations against sexual minorities.

Uganda is not an exception, but instead the logical evolution of an alarming trend. More than two thirds of African countries have laws criminalizing consensual same-sex acts. Even nations that do not have similar legislation encourage human rights violators by failing in their duty to protect their citizens' right to security and creating a culture of impunity. The brutal gang rape and fatal stabbing of a prominent South African black lesbian activist and the sentencing of nine Senegalese men involved in HIV prevention services for gay men to eight years in prison for “engaging in acts against the order of nature” are two incidents that illustrate the type of violations occurring with devastating frequency. Arbitrary arrests, assaults, intimidation, sexual violence and murder against LGBT people are the norm in many parts of the developing world.

We strongly believe that the issues at stake are larger than the specific concerns of any one group in society, but rather represent a grave threat to human rights for all. Whenever

basic human rights such as equal recognition under the law, the right to life, assembly, association, expression, privacy, and non-discrimination are denied, we are compelled by our moral traditions and by history not to remain silent. It is in that spirit that we ask you to add your support to the Congressional letters to Presidents Obama and Museveni.

Sincerely,

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