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Opinion

Homophobia and AIDS funding can't coexist

The U.S. sends millions of dollars in relief money to Uganda, which is considering a draconian law aimed at homosexuals.

November 20, 2009 | By James Kirchick

(Page 2 of 2)

Aside from its evident inhumanity, such draconian legislation will only do massive harm to HIV-prevention efforts. Gay men are an at-risk community, and they already face severe repression in most African countries. Because of conservative social mores and government repression, many are hesitant to come forward to get information regarding safe sexual practices. This bill could make the very discussion of condom use and HIV prevention for gay men illegal. By driving gays even further underground, such governmental homophobia only ensures that HIV will continue to spread unabated.

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When a government actively encourages homophobia, the effect reverberates throughout society. Uganda's president, Yoweri Museveni, has accused European gays of coming to his country to "recruit" people into homosexuality. Ugandan newspapers and bloggers have seized on the proposed law to launch their own broadsides against gays, posting the names and photographs of individuals in Wild West-style "wanted" posters in print and online. A major tabloid, the Red Pepper, trumpeted an expose headlined "Top Homos in Uganda Named" as "a killer dossier, a heat-pounding and sensational masterpiece that largely exposes Uganda's shameless men and unabashed women that have deliberately exported the Western evils to our dear and sacred society."

From 2004 through 2008, Uganda received a total of \$1.2 billion in PEPFAR money, and this year it is receiving \$285 million more. Clearly, the United States has a great deal of leverage over the Ugandan government, and the American taxpayer should not be expected to fund a regime that targets a vulnerable minority for attack -- an attack that will only render the vast amount of money that we have donated moot.

Earlier this month, members of Congress led by the House Foreign Affairs Committee chairman, Howard L. Berman (D-Valley Village), and its ranking minority member, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), sent a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton calling on the U.S. "to convey to Ugandan leaders that this bill is appalling, reckless and should be withdrawn immediately." And in an open letter to Dr. Eric Goosby, the new U.S. global AIDS coordinator, Charles Francis, a member of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS during the Bush administration, asked, "Will we stand by and let national governments scapegoat a sexual minority for HIV/AIDS while receiving major funding for AIDS relief?"

Irresponsible and reprehensible behavior on the part of Ugandan officials should lead to a serious re-evaluation of U.S. policy and an ultimatum for the Ugandan government: It must desist in its promotion of deadly homophobia or say goodbye to the hundreds of millions of dollars it has received due to the generosity and goodwill of the American people.

James Kirchick is an assistant editor of the New Republic and a contributing writer to the Advocate.

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