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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

Since its inception in 2003, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief -- PEPFAR -- has become the largest public health program in history. Created by President George W. Bush, it has distributed nearly \$50 billion worldwide, mostly in Africa, to prevent the spread of HIV and to treat its victims. Over the last five years, the fund has provided care for 3 million people and prevented an estimated 12 million new infections. Even Bush's harshest critics do not deny that PEPFAR has been a huge success in combating the AIDS epidemic.

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In spite of all that the program has accomplished, however, a persistent problem remains: the promotion of homophobia by African governments receiving American aid money. In no nation is this problem more acute than in Uganda, one of 15 PEPFAR "focus" countries that collectively account for half of the world's HIV infections. Homosexuality is considered a taboo in most of Africa, yet few governments have gone to the lengths of Uganda's in punishing it. The consequences are devastating not only for the people directly affected by these adverse policies but for the fight against AIDS in general.

Uganda's campaign against homosexuality took a disturbing turn last month when a member of parliament in the nation's governing majority introduced legislation that would stiffen penalties for actual or perceived homosexual activity, which is already illegal under Ugandan law. According to the proposed law, "repeat offenders" could be sentenced to death, as would anyone engaging in a same-sex relationship in which one of the members is under the age of 18 or HIV-positive. Gay-rights advocacy would be illegal, and citizens would be compelled to report suspected homosexuals or those "promoting" homosexuality to police; if they failed to do so within 24 hours, they could also be punished.

International human rights groups have protested the bill, but their complaints have only made the government more defiant. "It is with joy we see that everyone is interested in what Uganda is doing, and it is an opportunity for Uganda to provide leadership where it matters most," the country's ethics and integrity minister has said.

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