

Rights Groups Demand Protection of Gays in Kenya

Alisha Ryu | Nairobi 18 February 2010



A human rights watchdog says it is alarmed over reports of increasing vigilante violence in Kenya against people accused of homosexual conduct and groups offering HIV/AIDS services.

New York-based Human Rights Watch has condemned anti-gay violence that erupted last Friday in a coastal town northeast of the port city of Mombasa.

According to Human Rights Watch sources in Mtwapa town, an armed mob of 200 to 300 people raided a government health center that provides HIV/AIDS services to the community in a bid to "flush out gays." The mob severely beat a man who tried to enter the health center and tried to set him on fire before the police arrived and took the half-conscious man into custody.

The following day, another mob attacked a volunteer at the health center in Mtwapa before he, too, was taken into police custody. The violence spread to Mombasa, where a crowd beat a suspected homosexual in the streets. A second man accused of being a homosexual was attacked in Mombasa on Tuesday.

Homosexuality is illegal in Kenya and is punishable by as long as 14 years in jail. Human Rights Watch says while the accused men taken into custody were never charged and later released, the police have not tried to arrest any of the mob leaders nor halt the attacks.

A prominent Kenyan gay activist Poulina Kimani says attacks on the government health center and suspected homosexuals began after a rumor began circulating in late January. The rumor involved a gay wedding that was allegedly going to take place in Mtwapa town on February 12.

Kimani says local Christian and Muslim leaders urged their congregations to expose homosexuals and to turn them in to the police. The religious leaders also criticized the Kenyan government for providing HIV/AIDS service to gays, describing them as "criminals."

"I completely understand that all of us have very different ways of thinking," said Kimani. "But religious leaders start to make very hateful speeches and incite violence on a community and not one single authority has spoken against it, even though incitement of hatred is criminal in our laws."

In neighboring Uganda, a controversial anti-homosexuality bill, now before the Ugandan parliament, also has alleged links to religious leaders.

It has been widely reported that the bill, which contains a clause that allows capital punishment for some gay people, was inspired by American evangelical preachers involved in a movement to stop homosexuality through prayer and faith in Christianity.

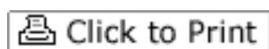
Homosexuality is already against the law in Uganda and punishable by lengthy jail terms.

U.S. President Barack Obama has called the proposed legislation in Uganda "odious."

Human rights activists say violence and discrimination are rising against gays because authorities in the region are condoning public hostility. Rights groups say they also worry that attacks on clinics providing HIV/AIDS services could affect not only gay men, but millions of heterosexual people suffering from the disease.

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