

As Uganda re-considers anti-gay law, former bishop calls for tolerance

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(ENInews)--As legislators in Uganda prepare to re-open debate on a bill that would harshly punish homosexuals, a church leader who campaigns for gay rights has renewed his call for tolerance and compassion.

Christopher Ssenyonjo, former Anglican bishop of West Buganda diocese, said in an 18 November interview with ENInews that fear of attack among lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered people, or LGBTs, was increasing each day with many being forced to shift houses.

"People have to be more tolerant. We have to make them understand that homosexuals are not different from them as human beings. [Gay] people are suffering and we believe the problem is in failing to understand them," said Ssenyonjo from Kampala, Uganda's capital.

Discussions on the Anti-Homosexuality Bill 2009 which would punish homosexual acts with the death penalty or long imprisonment were postponed in May after parliament adjourned. The bill also proposes to criminalize various related acts, including the jailing of people who fail to turn over gay people to the police, and those who "promote" homosexuality.

The legislation which was introduced in October 2009, has drawn wide condemnation from international faith and human rights groups.

"People are instigating to have the bill debated. This is creating much anxiety among gays and lesbians who keep guessing what will happen next," said Ssenyonjo, who was deprived of his clerical roles by the Ugandan church in 2002 over his support for gays. He formed a church in 2006 called the Charismatic Church of Uganda and runs the St. Paul's Foundation, which works with LGBT people and other marginalized groups. Ssenyonjo began counseling gays and lesbians and

lobbying for their rights in 1998.

In Africa, he said, homosexuality has not been understood and many base their discussions on ignorance. Even in African countries where homosexuality is legal, gays and lesbians are still targets, he added. Many Christians in Uganda, including church leaders, oppose homosexuality, believing it is sinful and against biblical teaching.

Last January, David Kato, 46, a prominent gay rights campaigner in Uganda, was beaten to death in a crime thought to be related to his work. The High Court of Uganda sentenced a man to 30 years in prison for the murder.

The gay rights debate in Uganda is being blamed for the failure of The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria to approve US\$270 million in aid to help purchase AIDS drugs for over 100,000 people. The Ugandan New Vision newspaper reported on 15 November that the reason for the denial was due to police deemed harsh on sexual minorities.

The fund has denied the claim. In an online comment, Jon Liden, the fund's communications director, said, "a panel of independent experts turned down the HIV proposal mainly because significant funds from an earlier HIV grant are still unspent, raising doubts about Uganda's ability to take on a much larger HIV grant before it had effectively invested the resources it already has available."

Meanwhile, on 10 November Frank Mugisha, 29, a leader of Sexual Minorities Uganda, an underground organization, was awarded in Washington, D.C. the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award. The activist said the prize gave him more courage in his work. His group's members shift location frequently for fear of attack.