

Rights Action
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Honduras Is Test Of New U.S. Policy On Gay Rights

By Tim Johnson, Miami Herald

Last fall, we reported on Honduras being the 'Murder capital' of the world, statistically; of being the 'Journalist-killing capital' of the world, proportionate to population; and now it is reported to have one of the highest levels of repression against and killing of LGBT people. There is no doubt that these extreme levels of State repression and generalized violence have increased drastically since the June 2009 military coup.

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HONDURAS IS TEST OF NEW U.S. POLICY ON GAY RIGHTS

By Tim Johnson, McClatchy Newspapers, Jan. 17, 2012

<http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/01/17/2593984/honduras-is-test-of-new-us-policy.html>

SAN PEDRO SULA, Honduras — From U.N. chambers to the halls of the State Department, global pressure on countries to protect the rights of homosexuals and transgender people is rising. For Josue Hernandez, the new emphasis can't come fast enough.

The 33-year-old gay activist bears the scar of the bullet that grazed his skull in an attack a few years ago. He's moved the office of his advocacy group four times. Still, he feels hunted in what is arguably the most homophobic nation in the Americas.

"We are in a deplorable state," Hernandez said of homosexuals in Honduras. "When we walk the streets, people shout insults at us and throw rocks. Parents move their children away."

Three months ago, a U.N. report declared that discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people — or LGBT — violates core international human rights law. It listed nations where violations are most severe.

Joining a push that originated in Europe, the Obama administration said in December that respect for LGBT rights is now a factor in its foreign policy decisions. "Gay rights are human rights, and human rights are gay rights," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in what diplomats described as a landmark speech Dec. 6 in Geneva. "It is a violation of human rights when governments declare it illegal to be gay, or allow those who harm gay people to go unpunished."

But even as that view grows more prevalent, it has yet to translate into better security, less hostility or fewer killings in places like Honduras, a nation of 8 million people in Central America.

Since the beginning of 2010, Honduras has tallied at least 62 homicides within the LGBT community, and some experts say the count may be far higher. Some victims have been mutilated and even burned.

The killing of homosexuals is part of broader lawlessness. Honduras registered more than 6,700 homicides last year and has the highest per capita murder rate in the hemisphere. One recent victim was Carlos Porfirio Juarez, a 25-year-old deaf mute who was taking hormones as part of a switch in gender to become "Karlita."

On Dec. 4, Juarez vanished while seeking sex clients at the Obelisco Park near the army general staff headquarters in Comayagua, a city adjacent to the capital, Tegucigalpa. "She didn't have a purse, a cellular phone or anything of value," said Jose Zambrano of the Association for a Better Quality of Life for those Infected with HIV/AIDS in Honduras. "Only her life," added Zambrano's sister, Sandra, a leader of the group. The killer stabbed Juarez in the chest multiple times.

Experts point to conservative religious sentiment, machismo, rampant impunity, and social pressure on police to "cleanse" undesirables for the violence against people who defy sexual and gender norms.

"The connotation of being gay, lesbian or trans here is that we are worthless. We have no rights. We should be killed," said Ramon Antonio Valladares, leader of the nonprofit Sanpedrana Gay Community. "We've had people who were tortured, who were crushed and spattered against the wall."

Few businesses catering to the gay community find a way to keep doors open in this manufacturing metropolis. It has only two known gay bars. "The police always come around with 'orders.' They allege some regulation or other, trying to shut the door. They say things like, 'There are minors here,'" said Valladares.

For gays, the battle can be both public and private. Some relatives shun them when they reveal their sexual orientation, forcing them onto the streets. Many, struggling to survive, turn to prostitution to earn a living.

Several dozen nonprofit groups that offer services, such as HIV testing, say they've been thwarted in efforts to register as corporations, a step that would grant them the legal status to open a bank account, appoint a board of directors or function as organizations. "We've tried to incorporate twice and we've been rejected both times," said Josue Hernandez, a leader of the Center for Education in Health, Sexuality and AIDS Prevention, a group with some 500 volunteers that has been operating since 1996.

Despite public antipathy, dozens of gay activists gather in front of the federal prosecutor's office in Tegucigalpa on the 13th of every month, the anniversary of the 2009 slaying of Walter Trochez, a prominent activist killed in a drive-by shooting.

Hostility toward homosexuals spilled into the newspapers in October. When promoters announced a benefit concert by pop singer Ricky Martin, who is openly gay, evangelical and Catholic leaders demanded that he be detained at the border to "protect the moral and ethical principles of our society." President Porfirio Lobo ordered immigration to let him in, saying that anything else would be "a highly reprehensible act of intolerance." Still, youngsters under 15 were banned from the concert because of alleged "erotic content."

Under Clinton's directive, U.S. embassies around the world have been instructed to champion LGBT protection and to take an active role in hotspots like Honduras, Uganda, Malawi, Pakistan and Serbia by channeling funds to advocacy groups and ensuring local officials know that assistance is linked to the issue.

Under pressure from Washington, Honduran authorities ordered police to set up a unit to investigate crimes against homosexuals and others. The unit began work in November. That unit and a partner squad of a prosecutor, three detectives and two analysts have been given U.S. funds to function. Even so, there have been fewer than five arrests in LGBT slayings.

U.S. Ambassador Lisa Kubiske said she believes the policy emphasis to protect rights associated with sexual orientation will have an impact, and not just in Honduras. Advocates for legal protection of sexual diversity say they see favorable global trends. Groups supporting homosexuals are emerging openly, they say. Spikes of violence against activists may actually signal headway.

"The general arc of acceptance and tolerance is headed in a positive direction," said Mark Bromley, chairman of the Council for Global Equality, a Washington-based advocacy group.

In some parts of the world, violence against homosexuals rises and falls in tune with political cycles. Leaders use the issue to divert attention from other pressures, including economic hardship and demands for greater participation. "President (Robert) Mugabe created the textbook in Zimbabwe for scapegoating the LGBT community for distracting attention from corrupt elections and difficult economic times," Bromley said, referring to a campaign in that southern African nation over the past decade.

Laws criminalizing homosexuality have led the U.S. and British governments to threaten economic assistance to Malawi, Ghana and Uganda in Africa. "It does translate into dollars and cents," Bromley said, referring to the economic assistance, but "conditionality really is not the main tool in the tool kit."

He said a greater emphasis on providing training and funding to gay rights groups operating in difficult environments, such as Russia, has the potential for lasting impact, while U.S. diplomats bring up homosexual rights as part of broader human rights discussions. Bromley said persistent discussions on the matter "can be slow and, at times, tedious, but over the long term they do have impact."

WHAT TO DO

Demand an end to “BUSINESS AS USUAL”

Please keep on keeping on sending copies of this information, and your own letters, to Canadian and American politicians and government officials. Since the June 2009 military coup, that ousted the democratically elected government of President Zelaya in Honduras, the governments of the USA and Canada are the governments that have most supported and legitimized the post-coup, repressive regimes of Honduras. North American companies and investors have increased their business activities in Honduras since the coup.

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