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Zimbabwe: Situation of gays and lesbians including societal attitudes, treatment by government or state security forces; availability of state protection (2004 - February 2006)

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Situation and treatment

In 13 February 2006 correspondence, a representative of the Harare-based organization Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) provided the following information:

The position of lesbian and gay people is little different from any other perceived enemy of the state. Government clamps down on anyone who is either perceived as a threat to its powerbase or who is useful as a political scapegoat. This includes racial minorities such as whites, tribal minorities such as the Ndebele and Tonga, political opposition and the free press. We all live [in] a climate of fear. However, the position of lesbian and gay people is worsened by the fact that government has whipped up a climate of hysterical homophobia which gives homophobic elements in the population license to target gays and lesbians with violence, abuse and blackmail. Although younger people, especially in urban areas, are generally more tolerant having grown up with the knowledge that gay and lesbian people exist in their midst, older generations, in particular in rural areas, tend to be extremely homophobic. Some consider homosexuality an illness requiring the attention of faith healers.

That said, Zimbabwe is not the worst country in the world in which to be gay or lesbian. There have been no extra-judicial killings that we have come across which are directly linked to a person's sexual orientation. Homophobia is largely vocal and the state-controlled press reinforces stereotypes of lesbian and gay people being by nature criminal westerners who are part of an international plot to destabilise Zimbabwe and corrupt its children and culture. Gay and lesbian people, like many others, have no right of reply using government-controlled media. This means that there are often violent incidents when GALZ appears in public spaces such as the Zimbabwe International Book Fair.

In 2004 and 2005, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) also reported on the incidence of violence (16 Aug. 2004) and intimidation (5 Aug. 2005) directed against members of GALZ at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair. In August 2004, several GALZ members were reportedly attacked and beaten by an "angry mob" (IGLHRC 16 Aug. 2004).

According to *Country Reports 2004*, a "group of youths approached GALZ officials at the stand and threatened to beat them, after which the GALZ members fled" (28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 5). In August 2005, a "group of unidentified, smartly dressed, men" ordered GALZ to close its stand and proceeded to pack the group's belongings (IGLHRC 5 Aug. 2005). Seeing that the police were reportedly unwilling to intervene, GALZ members decided to leave rather than face the possibility of violence (ibid.).

In September 2005, GALZ provided a report on how members of the gay and lesbian community were affected by Operation Murambatsvina (IGLHRC 15 Sept. 2005), "the government's program of mass evictions and demolitions [...] which, according to the United Nations, deprived 700,000 men, women and children of their homes, their livelihoods, or both throughout the country" (HRW 18 Jan. 2006).

Concerning societal attitudes, a GALZ representative noted in 13 February 2006 correspondence that "[o]ne of the greatest fears that lesbian and gay people express is that, should their sexual orientation be discovered, they will be rejected by their families." Moreover, the GALZ representative stated that "[t]here are also real fears of dismissal from the workplace should one be discovered to be homosexual, although GALZ has never had a case to defend in this regard" (13 Feb. 2006). The latter attitude was corroborated by information found in a March 2005 article that appeared in the Washington-based feminist journal *Off Our Backs* (1 Mar. 2005). In particular, the article's author, Pat Groves, had spent six months researching lesbianism in Zimbabwe and noted that identifying oneself as gay or lesbian could, among other things, threaten one's physical safety and job security (*Off Our Backs* 1 Mar. 2005).

State protection

With regard to state protection, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe has openly condemned homosexuality on numerous occasions (IGLHRC 28 Jan. 2005; *Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 5) and reportedly stated in March 2004 that he was "morally repulsed by homosexuality" (IGLHRC 16 Aug. 2004). According to the aforementioned March 2005 *Off Our Backs* article, President Mugabe "has characterized homosexuality as the product of morally degenerated colonial cultures and denies that such behaviours were present in indigenous Zimbabwean cultures" (1 Mar. 2005).

In February 2006, a representative of GALZ stated that in Zimbabwe

[t]he law is homophobic. Consensual sodomy between men carries a maximum sentence of one year or a maximum fine equivalent to rape or both. There is no law criminalising sex between women but this makes little difference in a country where most women do not enjoy the right to bodily integrity. Women's sexuality is generally not recognised and a lesbian woman who can do without men, even when it comes to sex, is considered an even greater threat than a homosexual man.

In terms of the police, the lower ranks are often friendly towards lesbian and gay people. Higher up, police officers bend to [the] will of their political masters and have been known to act violently towards lesbians and gay men - in particular those who are black - because they perceive them as traitors to the state. The police have also been known to be linked to blackmailers. From personal experience I can report that the Presidential Guard acts with impunity.

Three of us were arrested for a traffic offence when I inadvertently parked too near to State House. Despite this being a minor traffic offence for which I paid the stipulated fine, we were all subjected to physical violence, humiliation and abuse and imprisoned for 72 hours in appalling sanitary conditions without food and with little water.

Although the rule of law is seriously threatened in Zimbabwe and the judiciary itself has been infiltrated by homophobia, there is still a certain amount of independence. However, the greatest fear that homosexuals have in this regard is being outed publicly by the state-controlled media which delights in reporting on salacious stories of homosexual crime (13 Feb. 2006).

Further information about state protection for gays and lesbians in Zimbabwe could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

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Off Our Backs [Washington]. 1 March 2005. Pat Groves. "We Are Everywhere! What an American Dyke Discovered about Lesbians in Zimbabwe." (Factiva)

Additional Sources Consulted

Internet sites, including: Afrol News, AllAfrica.com, Amnesty International, ArcInternational.net, BBC News, Behind the Mask, Freedom House, GayWired, GlobalGayz, International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA), Kubatana.net, Sodomy Laws, United Kingdom Immigration and Nationality Directorate, World News Connection.

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