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Latvian authorities fail to protect LGBT community

The Latvian authorities have failed to protect the physical security of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community as it celebrated "Riga Pride 2006", Amnesty International said today. The organization condemns the inactivity of the law enforcement agencies, especially in light of the alleged "security threats" received by the authorities.

"The Latvian authorities have failed to provide adequate protection during LGBT events this weekend. Last Saturday, gays and lesbians and their supporters were attacked with eggs, human excrement and were abused physically and verbally without receiving proper protection from law enforcement officials," Anders Dahlbeck, Amnesty International's researcher on Latvia, said.

On Wednesday 19 July, Riga City Council banned the "Riga Pride 2006" march because of alleged threats of violence against march participants. Three days later, on Saturday 22 July, those attending a church service held in support of Riga Pride 2006 were attacked by a large group of people who threw, among other things, eggs and excrement at them.

A Member of the European Parliament and members of national parliaments from around Europe were among those who shared a similar experience when they tried to leave a press conference organized by the Riga Pride 2006 at a hotel in central Riga. They and other participants in the press conference were attacked by a group of up to 100 anti-LGBT protesters.

The organizers of both events had requested police protection well in advance. Yet any significant police presence only materialized a few hours after the start of the attacks against the participants in the press conference. Eventually, 13 people were detained on administrative charges, and one on criminal charges.

"The Latvian authorities have breached their obligations under international law and standards to respect the rights to freedom of assembly and expression by banning the Riga Pride 2006 march. They have compounded this breach by failing to adequately protect the participants in the other events organized by the LGBT community," Anders Dahlbeck said.

"Why after the 'Riga Pride 2006' march had been cancelled due to perceived 'security threats' to the LGBT community, was so little protection afforded during the events organized by the community on Saturday 22 July?"

Amnesty International maintains that everyone is entitled to equal protection of the law, without discrimination on any grounds, and especially against violence or threat. Special attention should be given to the protection of human rights of members of potentially vulnerable groups, including minority groups.

Amnesty International recommends that the police and judicial authorities in Latvia should in future act with due diligence to protect LGBT people against violence from the wider community. The authorities should also make clear that such violence is a criminal offence and will not be tolerated. Specific directives and training should be given to law enforcement officials on their duty to protect the human rights of all individuals, regardless of their sexuality, and on how to identify and investigate homophobic crimes.

Background

Over the past years, violations of LGBT rights have become an increasing concern in Latvia. In July 2005, the first Gay Pride march in the country's history was originally banned by the Riga City Council. The Riga Administrative Court later overruled this decision and the march did take place. Leading up to the march, several leading Latvian politicians, including the deputy speaker of the Latvian parliament, had made homophobic remarks and statements. During the march, several LGBT persons were subjected to physical and verbal abuse by counter-demonstrators.

In December 2005, Latvia amended its constitution to explicitly prohibit marriage between two persons of the same sex. Same-sex marriage was already prohibited in Latvia's Civil Law.

In June 2006, the Latvian Parliament voted against an amendment to article 7 of the Latvian Labour Law. The amendment would have explicitly banned discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, bringing Latvian law in line with the EU's Employment Equality Directive (EU 200/78/EC).

See also: *Latvia must protect the rights to freedom of assembly and expression for all* (AI Index: EUR 52/002/2006) <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur520022006>

Latvia: Discrimination based on sexual orientation is a human rights violation (AI Index: EUR 52/001/2006) <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur520012006>

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