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Georgia: Homophobic violence mars Tbilisi Pride event

Police in the Georgian capital Tbilisi failed to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) activists as thousands of people violently attacked a Pride event today in what Amnesty International said was an ineffective response to organized and violent homophobia.

Georgian LGBTI activists were assembling in the capital's Pushkin park for a peaceful rally to mark the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO) when the event was cut short by a throng of angry counter-protesters reported to number in the thousands.

The ensuing violence resulted in 17 people being injured – 12 of whom were hospitalized, including three policemen and a journalist.

“Ironically this shameful violence marred a day that is meant to mark solidarity in the face of homophobic violence around the world, and it shows that the Georgian authorities have a long way to go to promote tolerance and protect LGBTI people and their human rights,” said John Dalhuisen, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

“The authorities must investigate this violence and bring to justice those responsible for committing acts punishable by law.”

Video from the scene depicts dozens of people apparently attempting to lynch a young man because they believed he was gay – something he denies, while making the sign of the cross in front of a nearby church. Police intervened to separate the man from the crowd, but no arrests were made at the time.

The attackers at today's event were accompanied by – and appear to have been encouraged by – the religious authorities from the Georgian Orthodox Church.

According to media reports, on Thursday the Church's highest authority, Patriarch Ilia II, called on the authorities to ban the LGBTI rights event, saying it would be "an insult" to Georgian tradition.

Amnesty International noted that this is the second consecutive year that police in Tbilisi have failed to protect LGBTI activists from violent attacks by Orthodox groups inspired by such intolerance.

“It is becoming a dangerous trend in Georgia to condone and leave unpunished the acts of violence against religious and sexual minorities if they are perpetrated by the Orthodox religious clergy or their followers. It is simply unacceptable for the authorities to continue to allow attacks in the name of religion or on the basis of anyone's real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity,” said Dalhuisen.

“It was clear from last year's events, as well as this year's announcements for the planned counter-demonstrations, that violence was to be expected. The police appeared to have been woefully unprepared and failed once again to ensure that LGBTI activists could exercise their right to freedom of assembly and expression.

“By failing to take effective measures and hold these accountable to justice, the Georgian authorities are allowing the intolerance and impunity to grow and fester. They must improve their policing of peaceful demonstrations in future and ensure that this is not allowed to happen again,” Dalhuisen added.