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Russia: New laws an affront to basic human rights

President Vladimir Putin's new laws criminalising blasphemy and outlawing public activism by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals are an affront to freedom of expression and an attack on minority rights, Amnesty International said today.

"This is the reality of Russia today – the suppression of any form of dissent or diverging views in all spheres of life, from the political to the social. This demonstrates once again the disregard the authorities there have for their international and national obligations in promoting the human rights of all people under their jurisdiction," said John Dalhuisen

The law criminalizing blasphemy which came into force today imposes fines of up to RUB 500,000 (over USD 15,000) and up to three years of imprisonment for public actions which disrespect or insult the religious beliefs of people in places of worship. If committed elsewhere, the offence carries up to a year of imprisonment and fine of up to RUB 300,000. \$9,000 USD.

This legislative assault on freedom of conscience comes in the aftermath of last year's trial and conviction of three members of the all-female Russian punk group Pussy Riot for "hooliganism on grounds of religious hatred" after they sang a protest song in Moscow's main Orthodox cathedral.

"The law on blasphemy effectively discriminates against non-believers. It aims to punish criticism of religious leaders or commentary on religious doctrine and tenets of faith in a way that is clearly inconsistent with the freedom of expression," said John Dahusien.

The second law targeting LGBTI individuals came into force yesterday, straight after being signed by President Putin. It imposes extortionate fines on those accused of promoting "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" which it says could morally corrupt children.

"This law will only increase further the high levels of discrimination and harassment of LGBTI people in the Russian society. It stigmatizes them and prevents and denies the right to sex education and support for young people exploring their sexuality," said John Dalhuisen.

It includes penalties of up to RUB 5,000 (US\$150) for individuals, up to 10 times that for officials, and up to RUB 1,000,000 (over US\$30,000) as well as possible three-month suspension of activities for organizations.

Last Saturday, a lawful LGBTI gathering in St.Petersburg was broken up by the police following a complaint that it violated a ban on "propaganda of homosexuality". Activists were assaulted by anti-gay protestors. The police detained 55 LGBTI activists; at least one sustained serious injuries.

"This is government sponsored intolerance. The law violates the prohibition of discrimination and explicitly infringes on the right to freedom of expression and assembly," said Jonh Dalhuisen.