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## Action not just words needed to tackle anti-gay hate crimes

*What is really needed is for children in schools to be taught about difference and that difference is okay – that it does not matter whether someone is gay or not gay.*

Hristina Stoyanova, mother of a medical student beaten to death in 2008 in Sofia because of his perceived sexual orientation

An urgent overhaul of Bulgarian laws is needed to ensure that hate crimes which all too frequently target gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people are properly investigated and prosecuted, Amnesty International recommends in a briefing published today.

“Dozens of LGBT people have been beaten, raped, and in one case murdered because of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. Most of these crimes have not been properly investigated and have gone unpunished,” said Emily Gray, Amnesty International’s expert on sexual orientation and gender identity.

“The Bulgarian authorities are not only failing in their duty to unmask the homophobic or transphobic motive on which these crimes are perpetrated, but they are failing to bring the perpetrators to justice.”

Amnesty International’s briefing, [\*Changing laws, changing minds: Challenging homophobic and transphobic hate crimes in Bulgaria\*](#), focuses on the failure of the police and prosecutors to address effectively crimes against LGBT people on the basis of widespread and deeply entrenched discriminatory attitudes towards them.

“Due to the absence of hate crimes legislation on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, motives are rarely sought or uncovered. It is important to unearth the motives if the police are to develop effective strategies to reduce and prevent these crimes,” Emily Gray said.

Mihail Stoyanov, a 25-year-old medical student was beaten to death in one of Sofia’s parks on 30 September 2008. Two young men were arrested as suspects in 2010. They were charged with “homicide with hooligan motive” and placed under house arrest for two years and then released as the Prosecutor did not issue an indictment during that period.

Ivelina, Kaloyan, Mitko, Kristina and Svetlio were attacked by a group of young men after last year’s Pride march in Sofia.

Three of them were punched and kicked to the ground. When the five reported the attack, the police first asked them whether they had provoked it.

A year on, the police has yet to identify the perpetrators and say the case is not a priority for them. “I

want to see this case resolved. It is important because the message will be that the authorities care and they can solve these issues,” Ivelina told Amnesty International.

Transgender individuals face additional discrimination and are attacked more frequently than lesbian, gay and bisexual people. In some instances, police have reportedly refused to investigate violence against transgender people. Discriminatory attitudes frequently prevent them from finding a job, and many turn to sex work in order to survive.

Bulgarian authorities have taken some steps towards equality for LGBT people, including through decriminalizing same-sex conduct and equalizing the age of consent in 2002; and banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation through the Protection Against Discrimination Act in 2004.

In March and April 2012, police officers attended training sessions in Sofia on how to deal sensitively with hate crimes. And the latest draft of a new Criminal Code presented for consultation in April 2012 covers hate crimes based on sexual orientation. But more needs to be done.

“Urgent measures are needed to counter prejudiced attitudes and pervasive homophobia and transphobia. Adopting and implementing legislation covering and defining attacks targeting people on the basis of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity as hate crimes is an important first step,” Emily Gray said.

“The Bulgarian authorities must clearly state that attacks against people who are or are perceived to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender will not be tolerated; and that such attacks will be thoroughly investigated and the perpetrators prosecuted.”