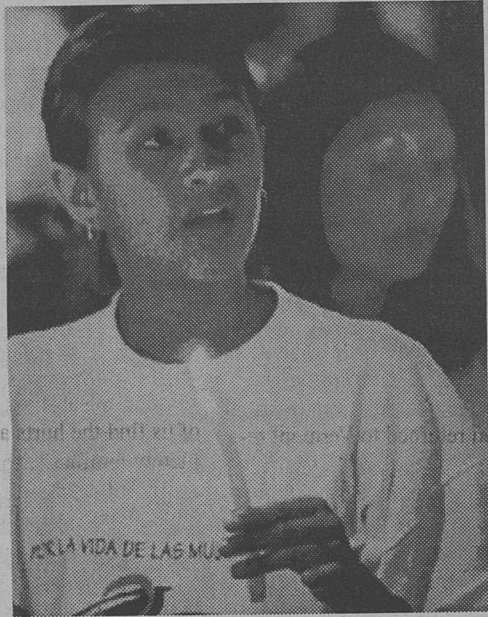


LGBTQ Matters to Amnesty International Global Human Rights Conference



BY JUDITH BECKETT

This year Amnesty International's Global Human Rights Conference was held in conjunction with Gay Games 2002 in Sydney, Australia. From October 30 through November 3, over 300 LGBT activists from around the world met to focus on sexuality rights. Because the Conference took place in Australia, particular attention was paid to the rights situations in countries of the Asian Pacific.

In recent email correspondence with me, Conference Coordinator Allison Orr wrote, "I think holding the Conference on the days leading up to the opening ceremony of the Gay Games was a good idea. People came eager to be friendly and participate. Attendees joined in the discussions with enthusiasm and intelligence."

One goal of Amnesty International (AI) conference was to raise public awareness of the human rights violations suffered by LGBT and intersex people worldwide. The core premise of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is that all members of the human family are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Yet in most countries – including the U.S., where in the past year 25 trans people have died through anti-trans violence – LGBT (lesbian/gay/bi/trans) and intersex people brave enough to declare their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity are harassed, discriminated against, deprived of their freedom, tortured or even killed.

LGBT and intersex people are always convenient scapegoats for rising crime rates and the widening gap between rich and poor. Governments deny human rights abuses, claiming they are upholding religious, cultural or moral standards.

Twelve countries in the world today call for the execution of people committing homosexual acts. In the U.S., 18 states have sodomy laws that criminalize private consensual acts between adults. Five states exclusively criminalize such acts between same sex couples.

AI believes that sexual orientation and gender identity are fundamental aspects of our human identity. Therefore, AI is working to denounce such atrocities and to encourage and support activists around the world struggling to break through the wall of silence.

Organizers also wanted to bring together notable and inspirational leaders on one platform. Indeed, a sample of speakers and workshops at the Conference reflects the diversity of individuals and cultures brought together for the event.

For instance, Rodney Croome, best known as an activist involved in the long and successful struggle for gay law reform in Tasmania, spoke on "Learning from the Majority World: Creative Activism in a Cultural Context." Julian Jayaseela, a Malaysian Indian AIDS activist, film producer, and scriptwriter, addressed "Sexuality and Torture in the Pacific." Ashok Row Kavi spoke about "Hindu and Buddhist Responses to Political Homosexual Identity and the New Movement in India."

Organizers also hoped to provide a forum for diverse cultures to exchange ideas and share skills in an environment that fostered idealism and activism. Many of the workshops and speakers provided this forum for attendees.

Anna Lawarik, a transgender woman, facilitated a workshop on "The Effect of Prison on Transgender People," based on her own experience with incarceration. Paula Gerber, a dedicated human rights activist with Amnesty International Australia who has dedicated her professional career to human rights law, spoke about "Using the Classroom to Combat Sexuality Based Politics." The Swedish Ombudsman Against Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation, Hans Ytterberg, presented "The Possibility of the Provision of Effective Remedies to Discrimination and Violence."

Presenters also came from Fiji, Canada, South Africa, Hong Kong, England, Nigeria, and Nepal.

"The attendance of so many activists from such different parts of the world was exciting. It became clear that activism exists in a cultural context and that different solutions are required for different communities. And yet it was also clear that there are similarities between people's experiences," Orr wrote.

AI took up the struggle for LGBT human rights in 1979 when activists there first became aware of the systematic abuses suffered by LGBT people on all continents and in almost all countries. As the LGBT movement has gained strength internationally, human rights abuses have escalated, perpetrated by those who have the most to lose if societies change. Orr wrote, "I think this was a great learning experience for everyone. It was a chance to truly understand what other people are going through."

According to AI, in February 2001, in Somalia two women who had lived together for some time were sentenced to death for "cultural perversion." In May 2001, 52 men in Egypt, perceived to be homosexuals, were arrested and tortured. Twenty-one of these men were convicted of "habitual debauchery." A 16-year-old boy was sentenced to three years in jail for "sexual immorality." The next year, in 2002, three men were publicly beheaded in Abha, Saudi Arabia possibly solely for their sexual orientation after a trial shrouded in secrecy.

Closer to home, on July 19, 2000, an African American gay man, Frederick Mason, was arrested by the Chicago police. Shouting racist and anti-gay slurs, Officer Luis Alejo pulled down Mason's pants and jammed a police nightstick up Mason's rectum while he was handcuffed to the wall. AI and CABN (Chicago Anti-Bashing Network) demanded an outside investigation and a settlement was reached in August 2001. This case gave rise to AI's first-ever landmark report on gay-bashing in the United States.

"People spoke openly and honestly about their experiences," Orr continued, "and despite the very traumatic nature of some of the stories, most people spoke in a very positive way. The conference put a

human face on the persecution that activist's work against."

In addition to publicizing the atrocities, AI feels it is equally important to celebrate and make public successes and gains. For instance, on April 24, 2002, the New York City Council amended the New York City Human Rights Ordinance to include "gender identity expression." In Romania, Article 200 of the Romanian Penal Code – criminalizing same-sex relations – has finally been repealed after years of campaigning by international and Romanian LGBT organizations. At the same time, Romania has passed an anti-discrimination law. Finally, there are now twelve states in the U.S. that have progressive anti-discrimination laws on their books. Vermont is one of them, but does not specifically include gender or gender presentation.

The final goal of the Conference was to mobilize a wider network of support on both international and local levels. The delegates of the 2002 Amnesty International Global Human Rights Conference passed the following resolution:

"We call upon the United Nations to adopt a declaration on the right to Sexual and Gender Self-Determination for all persons. We, the aforementioned delegates, also call on the Australian Government to advocate internationally for such a Declaration, and to advocate for the accreditation of the LGBT non-governmental organizations to the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

"Furthermore, we the delegates call upon Amnesty International to support and advocate for the above mentioned Declaration and the accreditation of LGBT non-governmental organizations to the United Nations Economic and Social Council."

Right now, AI activists are planning a publication around the issues and ideas of the Conference, putting papers from the Conference on the website, and adding links to the website that have been recommended by attendees at the Conference.

"We hope to build this into a really useful resource for LGBT activists," Orr wrote.

And on the local level? "People were so busy talking during the breaks it was sometimes difficult to get the speeches and workshops started again!" Orr said. "I know of several people who have plans to meet up again in their own countries, or who have formed email networks. We wanted the Conference to be an opportunity for people to meet and network, and I think that was achieved. I believe that listening to the courage and determination of others will encourage people to return to their communities and continue their LGBT campaigning with renewed vigor."

You can download AI's report *Crimes Of Hate, Conspiracy Of Silence: Torture And Ill-Treatment Based On Sexual Identity* or register to take action against torture at www.stoptorture.org. ▼

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