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Cameroon: Pope should reiterate commitment to ending the criminalization of homosexuality

Amnesty International today urged Pope Benedict XVI to express the importance of eradicating discrimination based on sexual orientation, as he visits Cameroon on his first trip to Africa.

The Cameroonian Penal Code criminalizes same-sex sexual relations.

Amnesty International has documented the arrest and detention of several dozen young men and women some of whom, over the last three years, have been sentenced to prison terms and fines for allegedly engaging in consensual same-sex sexual relations.

“The Pope should take the important opportunity of this visit to Cameroon to make clear that the Holy See abhors any attacks or persecution of people based on their sexual orientation, and call on the government to decriminalize homosexuality,” said Tawanda Hondora, Deputy Director of Amnesty International’s Africa Programme.

The Holy See said at a meeting of the UN General Assembly in December 2008 that it “continues to advocate that every sign of unjust discrimination towards homosexual persons should be avoided, and urges States to do away with criminal penalties against them.”

Amnesty International and other human rights organizations have made numerous appeals to the Cameroonian authorities, religious organizations and the media to uphold, respect and protect the human rights of all people in Cameroon, regardless of their sexual orientation.

In December 2005, a senior Cameroonian Roman Catholic Church leader was reported by local media to have publicly denounced homosexuality. Since then, many have been persecuted.

“Dozens of Cameroonian men and women have been detained solely for their actual or perceived engagement in consensual same-sex sexual relations – this is simply unacceptable. We hope that the Pope will make this clear to the government and the Church’s leaders and many followers in Cameroon during his visit,” said Tawanda Hondora.

On Thursday, Pope Benedict will be meeting with members of the Special Council for Africa of the Synod of Bishops at the Apostolic Nunciature of Yaoundé.

Notes to editors:

The criminalization of people based on their sexual orientation contravenes international and regional human rights treaties to which Cameroon is a party.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protects the rights to freedom from discrimination (articles 2 and 26), privacy (article 17), freedom of conscience (article 18) and freedom of expression (article 19). The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights guarantees freedom from discrimination in its Article 2.

In a typical case, two men were arrested on 16 August 2007 by gendarmes in Yaoundé, accused of engaging in same-sex sexual relations. The suspects were held at Nlongkak gendarmerie until 31 August 2007, when they were transferred to Kondengui prison. In March 2006, 12 young women were permanently excluded from a college in Douala for their alleged same-sex sexual relations. Amnesty International is concerned that the girls were expelled solely because of their sexual orientation, depriving the girls of their right to education.

While in custody, the detainees were subjected to anal examinations in an attempt by the authorities to establish if they had been engaged in sexual acts. Such examinations have no medical basis and constitute a violation of the prohibition against torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. The men appeared in court on 23 November 2007 and pleaded not guilty to engaging in same-sex sexual relations. On 13 March 2008, the court found them guilty of same-sex acts and sentenced them to six months' imprisonment and a fine of 25,000 CFA Francs (approximately \$US44). They were released soon after their trial because they had already spent more than six months in custody.

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