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Concern for missing Ugandan gay rights activist

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95% of Ugandans want homosexual acts to remain illegal

One of three people who demonstrated at an AIDS international conference in Uganda has disappeared.

Usaam Auf Mukwaya was arrested at the HIV/AIDS Implementers' Meeting last month.

Their protest was sparked when the head of Uganda's AIDS commission said that gay people are driving up the number of infections in the country, but would not be targeted with prevention work.

The international meeting was organised by a group of countries and organisation, among them the US, the World Bank, the UN.

On Friday Pepe Julian Onziema, another of the protesters currently facing court charges for criminal trespass, received a phone call from a motorcyclist who identified himself as Amis.

He said he was with Auf when they were ambushed by three men in a police patrol vehicle in Nakasero on their way back from saying prayers at a mosque.

Auf was on his way back to Speke Hotel where the rest of Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) Human Rights Defenders and friends had gathered after the protesters' court hearing.

"We were riding from Nakasero when a police patrol vehicle suddenly interrupted our way," reports Amis.

"We had approached Entebbe road junction and stopped waiting for cars to pass.

"As we were waiting, the police patrol parked in front of us and three policemen, two in uniform and one in plain clothes came and asked Auf to get on the patrol car.

"He asked for a pen from the policeman in plain clothes in order to write down some contacts. They allowed him to do so and he gave me the piece of paper and told me to call the contacts and inform them.

"There was no violence portrayed at the moment of the arrest."

Gay rights activists in Uganda are concerned about where Auf has been taken.

Last year Ugandan deputy Attorney General Fred Ruhindi called for the criminal law to be used against lesbians and gays.

Section 140 of Uganda's penal code carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment for homosexual conduct, while Section 141 punishes 'attempts' at carnal knowledge with a maximum of seven years of imprisonment.

Section 143 punishes acts of "gross indecency" with up to five years in prison, while a sodomy conviction carries a penalty of 14 years to life imprisonment.

A poll in August 2007 found that 95% of Ugandans want homosexual acts to remain illegal.

Government officials have regularly threatened and harassed lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Ugandans.

In 2005 Uganda became the first country in the world to introduce laws banning same-sex marriage.

Last summer SMUG, a coalition of four LGBT organisations, launched a campaign called "Let us Live in Peace."

At a press conference in Kampala on August 16th, the group condemned discrimination and violence against LGBT people, as well as the life-threatening silence about their sexualities in HIV/AIDS prevention programmes.

In response, Ethics and Integrity Minister James Nsaba Buturo told the BBC on August 17th that homosexuality was "unnatural."

He denied charges of police harassment of LGBT people, but also declared, "We know them, we have details of who they are."

In the wake of the SMUG press conference, Pastor Martin Ssempe organised an August 21 rally in Kampala to address what he called "a call for action on behalf of victims of homosexuality."

Calling homosexuality "a criminal act against the laws of nature," Ssempe led hundreds of demonstrators demanding government action against LGBT people.