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Uganda: The U.S. Religious Right Exports Homophobia to Africa

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(New York, March 4)- The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) and Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) condemned a seminar designed to attack lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Ugandans under the cloak of religion. The 3-day seminar in Kampala, which opens Thursday, March 5, features an array of U.S. speakers known for their efforts to dehumanize LGBT people and for their belief that homosexuality can be "cured." The speakers include Scott Lively, Don Schmierer, and Caleb Lee Brundidge—leading voices in the crusade by religious extremists to roll back basic human rights for LGBT people in the United States. Brundidge is affiliated with Extreme Prophetic Ministry in Phoenix, Arizona. Schmierer is on the board of the so-called "ex-gay" organization Exodus International. Lively is well known for his belief that the Nazi Holocaust never happened.

"The American religious right is finally showing its hand and revealing the depth of its support for homophobia in Africa," said IGLHRC's Executive Director Cary Alan Johnson. "This seminar will increase violence and other human rights abuses against LGBT people, women and anyone who doesn't conform to gender norms. This newest form of colonialism is deplorable and must be stopped."

The seminar is hosted by the by Family Life Network (FLN), a Ugandan non-governmental organization founded in 2002 that claims to be committed to the "restoration of Ugandan family values and morals." The FLN opposes access to safe, legal abortions. It also opposes the use of condoms and promotes abstinence-only programming as its approach to HIV prevention. The FLN makes the sensationalized claim that homosexuality is "spreading like wildfire in schools."

The event organizers have invited parents, teachers, government workers, politicians, counselors and faith leaders. The seminar costs 25,000 Ugandan Shillings a day (approximately \$12.60) to attend. Books and materials are extra.

"This seminar is just another way of encouraging hatred and abuse," said a spokesperson from SMUG. "We condemn their discriminatory words and actions that only lead to violence. Suffering is all that they are bringing to Uganda—all in the name of God."

"There is a lot of misunderstanding about human sexuality," said Ugandan Bishop Dr. Christopher Ssenyonjo, who was expelled from the Anglican Church for supporting gay people. "This workshop is going to bring more conflict, greater hostility, increased intimidation. We need love ... in the long run, love will overcome."

The U.S. religious right has a history of exporting homophobia to Africa. With support from anti-gay organizations and faith leaders such as Family Watch International and Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church, Pastor Martin Ssempe from Makerere Community Church has attacked not only gay men and lesbians, but also women's rights and HIV activism. Pastor Ssempe has stated, "there should be no rights granted to homosexuals in this country." In 2007, he organized a multi-denominational rally against LGBT rights in Kampala, where one cleric called for the "starving to death of homosexuals."

In response to this ongoing pattern of violence and abuse, SMUG launched its Let Us Live in Peace campaign, aimed at decreasing violence against LGBT Ugandans. The campaign was launched shortly after human rights defenders Victor Mukasa and Oyo Yvonne filed a lawsuit against the Attorney General related to an illegal raid on Mukasa's home. The plaintiffs won their case in December 2008—a landmark victory by organizers in a country that still punishes homosexuality by life in prison and has repeatedly made efforts to silence human rights leaders. FLN organizers cite this victory in the promotional materials for the seminar, saying that it shows that a "well organized homosexual machinery" is taking over Uganda, "wreaking havoc in individuals, families and the society."

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The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) is a leading human rights organization solely devoted to improving the rights of people around the world who are targeted for imprisonment, abuse or death because of their sexuality, gender identity or HIV/AIDS status. IGLHRC addresses human rights violations by partnering with and supporting activists in countries around the world, monitoring and documenting human rights abuses, engaging offending governments, and educating international human rights officials. A non-profit, non-governmental organization, IGLHRC is based in New York, with offices in Cape Town and Buenos Aires. Visit <http://www.iglhrc.org> for more information