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## Exporting Homophobia

by Cary Alan Johnson

Despite the global recession, the U.S. is promoting and aggressively selling a costly product overseas: homophobia. Uganda, one of America's closest partners in Africa, is currently home to vicious and violent attacks on its citizens based solely on their sexual orientation and gender identity. The high cost in terms of individual privacy and freedom of expression is mounting daily. Regrettably, much of the inspiration and call for these attacks is coming directly from these shores.

In March 2009, three American extremists flew to Uganda's capital city of Kampala to be featured speakers at a three-day training seminar focused on the "homosexual machinery wreaking havoc on individuals, families and society." Attendees, including Ugandan teachers, pastors, and parents, were bombarded with provocative lectures, slide shows, and glossy materials that offered advice on how to fight the "gay agenda" and "cure" gay people from their sexual orientation.

The three Americans—Scott Lively, Don Schmierer, and Caleb Lee Brundidge—work for groups such as the Extreme Prophetic Ministry in Arizona, the International Healing Foundation in Maryland, and Exodus International in Florida, all of which declare "homosexuality" to be sinful and advocate converting gay people to heterosexuality—an approach that is widely repudiated and even condemned by professional organizations including the American Psychological Association and the American Medical Association.

Lively, whose book, *The Pink Swastika*, makes the discredited claim that gays helped run the Nazi party, was quoted at the seminar as stating, "You have a gay movement in Uganda that is operating at a high level...this gay movement around the world has a handbook that they use and that is what the Ugandan gay movement is using now. You must be ready to stop this gay agenda."

Emboldened by the Americans' vilification of gay people, the seminar's Ugandan host organization, Family Life Network, immediately instigated a witch-hunt. The group mobilized "ex-gays" to appear on television and radio and announce the names, addresses and places of employment of supposed gays and lesbians in Uganda. The effects have been immediate and devastating. At least five people have been arrested and charged with "having carnal knowledge against the order of nature." Violent attacks of anyone suspected of being gay are occurring on the streets of Kampala with more frequency and intensity. Local tabloids, such as *The Red Pepper* have jumped into the fray by printing lists of men and women accused of being gay and lesbian.

Equally disturbing are calls for violence against gay men and lesbians from a coalition of the country's religious leaders representing the Church of Uganda, the Catholic Church, and the Muslim Supreme Council. A recent public outing of "who is gay in Uganda" took place at the church of veteran Ugandan

homophobe Martin Ssempe, who is a close friend of the head of America's Saddleback Church, Rick Warren. In 2007, Ssempe organized a rally in which one of his guest speakers encouraged the murder of all gay and lesbian people by means of starvation. Now in 2009, Ssempe himself has publicly announced the names and places of employment of gay men.

This homophobic campaign is intent on getting new legislation passed in Uganda that will expand already harsh penalties against consensual same-sex relationships (the Ugandan Penal Code already carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. How much more severe can a penalty be?) Petitioners are calling for an expansion of that law to make it illegal for people of diverse sexual orientations to meet, to share ideas, and to engage in self-help programs to prevent HIV. These types of laws will open the door to all manner of blackmail, police harassment, employment discrimination and violence by state and non-state actors as well as attacks on freedom of expression, association, and privacy.

When asked what he would say to a gay person excluded by the church, Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu said he would apologize: "You are members of this family." Every member of the human family deserves to be treated dignity and respect. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Ugandans should be able to live their lives in peace without the boot of the state on their necks or the fear of a homophobic lynch mob gathering outside their homes or workplaces. U.S. extremists are purposefully stoking the flames of homophobia in Uganda and inciting human rights abuses. In contrast, the U.S. government should stand up for justice and let Uganda know that any law that curtails basic human rights is wrong, that arresting people because of whom they are perceived to love is a crime, and that inducing violence and hatred is never a solution for resolving social conflict.

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