



The Secretary-General

Remarks at Event on Ending Violence and Criminal Sanctions Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

New York, 10 December 2010

[Salutations]

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you all for coming to this important event.

Today is Human Rights Day – a day we dedicate to defending freedoms and protections for all people.

We know how controversial the issues surrounding sexual orientation can be.

In the search for solutions, we recognize that there can be very different perspectives.

And yet ... on one point we all agree — the sanctity of human rights.

As men and women of conscience, we reject discrimination in general, and in particular discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

When individuals are attacked, abused or imprisoned because of their sexual orientation, we must speak out.

We cannot stand by, silent.

This all the more true in cases of violence.

These are not merely assaults on individuals.

They are attacks on all of us.

They devastate families. They pit one group against another, dividing larger society.

And when the perpetrators of violence escape without penalty, they make a mockery of the universal values we hold dear.

We have a collective responsibility to stand against discrimination ... to defend our fellow human beings and our fundamental principles.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Liberal democracy has spread in many parts of the world in recent decades.

In general, more and more of us have learned to cherish our diversity.

Today, many nations have modern constitutions that guarantee essential rights and liberties.

And yet ... homosexuality is considered a crime in more than 70 countries.

This is not right.

Yes, we recognize that social attitudes run deep.

Yes, social change often comes only with time.

Yet ... let there be no confusion:

Where there is tension between cultural attitudes and universal human rights, rights must carry the day.

Personal disapproval ... even society's disapproval ... is no excuse to arrest, detain, imprison, harass or torture anyone – ever.

Ladies and gentlemen,

From my first days in office, I have spoken out against stigma and discrimination.

I have worked, with some success, to persuade governments to lift travel restrictions on people with HIV.

During my recent trips to Africa, I urged leaders to do away with laws criminalizing homosexuality.

I was particularly happy that, in Malawi, I was able to secure the release of a young gay couple sentenced to 14 years in prison.

Yesterday evening, I spoke to a Human Rights Day event at the Ford Foundation. It was called “Speak Up,” a conversation with human rights defenders.

One of my fellow speakers was a young activist from Uganda.

Frank Mugisha has been working with a variety of civil society groups to stop legislation that institutionalizes discrimination against gay and lesbian people.

With extraordinary eloquence, he appealed to us, the United Nations, for help.

He asked us to rally support for the decriminalization of homosexuality everywhere in the world.

And that is what we will do.

We have been called upon, and we will answer.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In all these kinds of cases, I put myself on the line.

I take pains to find the right balance between public and private diplomacy to reach difficult solutions.

I will continue to do so.

I will continue to speak out ... at every opportunity, wherever I go.

And I will do so because this is the right thing to do.

Because this cause is just.

That is why this day ... this very special day ... means so much to me.

Human Rights Day commemorates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It is not called the partial declaration of human rights.

It is not the sometimes declaration of human rights.

It is the universal Declaration, guaranteeing all human beings their basic human rights ... without exception.

Violence will end only when we confront prejudice.

Stigma and discrimination will end only when we agree to speak out.

That requires all of us to do our part.

To speak out — at home ... at work ... in our schools and communities.

To stand in solidarity.

Your discussions today are part of that larger campaign ... yours and mine.

Together, we seek the repeal of laws that criminalize homosexuality ... that permit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity... that encourage violence.

People were not put on this planet to live in fear of their fellow human beings.

The watchwords of civilization have always been tolerance, understanding and mutual respect.

That is why we are here today.

And that is why we ask the nations and the peoples of the world to join us ...

To join us in common cause in the name of justice and a better life for all.

Thank you.