

Remarks at a High-Level Dialogue on Combating Violence Targeting LGBT

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I apologize for coming in late and probably leaving early. Am I correct? I am correct. I apologize. I just mentioned to the Secretary-General the extraordinary pace of UNGA, but this is special and I wanted to be part of it, and it's a great honor for me to be able to share in what is literally an historic event. Brooker, thank you. I don't know how he does it, Brooker -- he's at everything, this guy. (Laughter.) They must clone him or something.

But for the first time, this event is open to all delegations at the UN and includes the message you all just heard from the Secretary-General. And we need to take pride in that fact, obviously. But it really speaks, I think, to the sense of urgency that we all feel after a difficult year for the LGBT community in many parts of the world.

I want to thank the Secretary-General for his tremendous efforts. The Born Free and Equal campaign is literally breaking down barriers, and it's breaking down a barricade of stigma that for too long has kept LGBT persons from being able to live up to their full potential as human beings, as fellow citizens of any country. And we're particularly grateful for his decision this year to ensure that all same-sex partners of UN staff will get the same benefits as opposite-sex spouses. And that's how we make progress in this fight; it's by setting an example.

This meeting really couldn't happen at a more important time, and frankly we send a clear and compelling message by coming together today in the way that we are and particularly with my fellow ministers being here. We have a moral obligation to speak up against marginalization and persecution of LGBT persons. We have a moral obligation to promote societies that are more just and more fair, more tolerant. It's the right thing to do, but obviously, make no mistake, it happens to also be a strategic necessity. Greater protection of human rights we know, because we've seen it in country after country, leads to greater stability and greater prosperity not occasionally, but always.

And so I come here today with a very simple message: The United States remains unwavering in our commitment to advance LGBT equality here at home and around the world. Now, I know that all of us are more than aware of the anti-LGBT laws that are metastasizing in various places. And for some, it may be easy to get discouraged. But I don't think it's time to get alarmed; on the contrary, I think it's time to get active. I think it's time to push back with the realities of what is happening, because our work together in the world has the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of so many people.

Now, when I say that, those are not just words; it's based on experience, our experience. I think about my own country's journey, the United States of America. We have gone from a time when, just a few miles down the road, the New York City Police Department raided the Stonewall Inn to a time when that same police department marches annually in the city's pride parade. We've gone from a time when LGBT persons had to risk life and limb to fight for their basic rights, to one where we now honor the commitment of those willing to put on a uniform and fight and die for our country.

So I approach this issue very mindful of our past. I was in the United States Senate in the 1980s, '90s when the fight was really joined here. And I know how many Americans have had to push and work and struggle in order to be able to live up to the promise of our own founding as a nation. I'm proud to have been part of that progress. In my home state of Massachusetts, we've wrestled with the horrifying bullying of LGBT students, and as a father I know how heartbreaking that might be. That's why I sponsored legislation in the United States Senate to protect LGBT students from harassment and violence and fought to prevent homelessness among LGBT persons. That's why I also, way back in 1993, testified before the United States Senate Armed Services Committee, chaired then by Senator Strom Thurmond, in order to argue for lifting the ban on gays serving in our military. And the questions that I was asked in that hearing reminded me deeply of a Saturday Night Live skit. It's a long journey from there.

We've come a long way in the United States, but we know also the journey's not complete. We also know that we have a long road to travel in the world with greater difficulties in some place for all the obvious reasons of history and culture and some cases, religion – just battles that stand in front of us. The fact is that we've seen that LGBT communities face discriminatory laws and practices that attack their dignity, undermine their safety, and violate their human rights. Many LGBT people continue to be harassed, arrested, and even killed simply because of who they are or who they love.

We each have a responsibility to push back against a rising tide of violence and discrimination against LGBT persons, and it begins by speaking out at events like this and joining together. We have to acknowledge a fundamental truth that LGBT violence anywhere is a threat to peace and stability and prosperity everywhere. That's why we're giving our soulful support to the Latin American-led resolution before the Human Rights Council that seeks to combat violence and discrimination against LGBT persons. The United States stood by South Africa in 2011 when it sponsored the first council resolution addressing the human rights of LGBT persons, and we are standing with Chile, Colombia, Uruguay, and Brazil as they carry forward that legacy. And the resolution will be put to a vote in Geneva tomorrow and we look forward to its passage with broad support from the international community.

That's also why we coauthored, along with Colombia and Slovenia, a joint statement on sexual orientation and gender identity that was signed by 85 UN members. And today I'm very pleased to announce that the Republic of Korea, Seychelles, Monaco, and El Salvador have signed on to the General Assembly declaration on the same subject. That's why we fight to ensure that NGOs advocating for the rights of LGBT persons are able to fully participate in UN meetings. And that's why we're going to be working again this year to ensure that the UN General Assembly

Resolution on Extrajudicial Executions includes language condemning the killing of individuals because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

And we're also stepping up our engagement with the Global Equality Fund. And since the United States launched this groundbreaking effort in 2011, we've provided emergency assistance to more than 200 human rights defenders. And that's because ultimately the battle for equality for LGBT persons will be won not only on the floor of the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, but frankly, in the streets and businesses and schools of cities around the world and ultimately in the hearts and minds of the people who live there. And so we will keep fighting.

I know that sometimes the challenges are daunting for everybody. But I take heart in the words of the playwright George Bernard Shaw, quoted so frequently and eloquently by a slain candidate for president, Robert Kennedy, who kept reminding people: "Some men see things as they are and ask, 'Why?'; I dream things that never were, and ask, 'Why not?'" That's what pride means. That's what this struggle means, to ask why not in order to show solidarity and stand up no matter where you are, who you love, what your life is. It's more than a message. It's really a movement. We've proven that in so many places where change has come. And the younger generation is growing up with a whole different sense of these possibilities. That's what can give us hope and that's why we will keep moving forward towards justice and equality for all.

Thank you.