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OHCHR – UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

UN rights experts fear Uganda is using COVID-19 emergency powers to target LGBT people

GENEVA (27 April 2020) – UN experts are alarmed that Uganda could be using COVID-19 emergency laws to target gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people and urged the government to strictly limit the use of emergency power to public health issues.

“We are deeply concerned about a raid on an LGBT shelter in Kyengera on 29 March and the arrest and detention of 19 people perceived to be LGBT persons,” the UN human rights experts said.

The group of experts said they had been told local authorities raided the shelter based on the perceived sexual orientation or gender identity of the residents, who were then charged for allegedly disobeying coronavirus regulations on physical distancing. It is feared the authorities are not using COVID-19 measures solely for the protection of public health.

“Emergency powers to combat crises, such as COVID-19, derive their strength and legitimacy from strict adherence to their object and purpose,” said the experts. Any emergency response linked to COVID-19 must be proportionate, necessary and non-discriminatory. “When authorities use emergency powers for different purposes, they are acting arbitrarily. In this case, we are concerned about a possible violation of the prohibition of arbitrary detention.”

Using COVID-19 emergency powers for other purposes, such as targeting particular groups under the guise of protecting health, jeopardises the whole response system. Abuses must be prevented, investigated and punished to safeguard the common good, they said.

The experts also highlighted concerns that the detainees in this case allegedly have no access to their lawyer due to the COVID-19 measures, and are being exposed to a greater risk of violence and discrimination because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.

“The right to access to legal assistance is a fundamental human right afforded to everyone,” they stressed.

The UN experts called on Uganda to include the detainees in the planned release of about 2,000 inmates to prevent an outbreak of COVID-19 cases in prisons.

“We strongly urge the Ugandan authorities to respect people’s rights and dignity during the crisis and to strictly limit the exercise of emergency power to the protection of public health in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic,” they said.

ENDS

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UN Human Rights, country page: Uganda
(/EN/Countries/AfricaRegion/Pages/UGIndex.aspx)

ecoi.net summary:

UN experts alarmed as individuals have been arrested under pretext of violating COVID-19 restrictions in a police raid on a LGBTI shelter in Kyengera on 29 March 2020



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