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The United Belize Advocacy Movement Cumulative Report on Homophobia In Belize

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Organizational Background

The United Belize Advocacy Movement is an NGO incorporated, since May 4th, 2006 that works with men who have sex with men (MSM) and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons (LGBT) persons in Belize, particularly as it relates to issues in health, policy analysis and support among a few of our activities. Its president serves on the International Advisory Board for the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, locally, on three sub-committees at our National AIDS Commission for Care, Treatment and Support; Policy and legislation and Prevention. The work in LGBT health goes back to 2005 when purely, on a humanitarian basis, HIV health education work was started with the men who have sex with men population for the Pan American Health Organization in Belize City.

UNIBAM is the only organization in Belize that is led by MSM/LGBT persons with an openly gay man as president. Its work extends itself to coalition-based work led by Global Right, IGLHRC and Mulabi as well as its affiliation with the Caribbean Vulnerable Coalition. The LGBT OAS Coalition have led the way in making LGBT declarations since 2007 and working with the Brazilian government to pass the first LGBT resolution AG/RES 2435 (XXXVIII-0/08) in OAS history which condemned acts of violence and other human rights abuses. Building on this work, coalition members have participated in three sub-regional meetings of which a representative of UNIBAM, was able to submit recommendations to the Caribbean sub-regional forum held in October, 2008 in Port of Spain. Our work continues for this year at the 39th Generally Assembly of the OAS and our effort to look at the “Convention to Eliminate All Racial Discrimination and All other forms of Intolerance.”

Two major research studies on barriers to health services and quality of health services for men who have sex with men have been conducted and workshops designed according that meets the health information needs of this population. Its president have attended national and regional meetings as an openly gay man, done TV four times to talk about homophobia, and done an organizational report that lead to the writing of the UPR report for 2009 on how the law is state sanction discrimination that violates the sexual and reproductive rights of individuals. E-consultations and education has been done through that focused on LGBT matters through the community gay yahoo groups, group's sessions and informal interviews with little or no money provided by the state as it has argued that it cannot make targeted investments for one population as services must be integrated.

It can be said that the state does not actively sanction discrimination, but it cannot be said that it has done anything to strengthen laws or proactively removed, develop laws or policies that is consistently inclusive of the needs of LGBT person in the country. For the most part, there is a difference between practice and policy and as such, practice is more of a problem than policy at present. Still, state indifference and reluctance to address the issue of homophobia head on is what sustains prevailing cultural attitudes in the country. Laws on the books not only remains unequal, it prevent the recognition of the gender identity change for transgender persons and does not protect a person from discrimination base on sexual orientation and gender identity. These are just examples of sustained discrimination by the state. It can be said that while reports of discrimination is based on individual practice outside and inside government systems, the indifference in the system remains as there are no sensitization training with uniform populations of health service providers directly, justified by

the argument that the system has too many other priorities, hence, a fragmented approach exists at best.

Media Problems

Media Homophobia:

In 5/6/05 The Belize Times, wrote an article called "What homosexual Wants." The article pointed out the following "Homosexuals want to be whipped, properly flogged. They need to read the word of God....Homosexuals are sick people. Nasty too. They defy the order of nature. For nowhere in Africa or any other continent do lions...alligators go mating with the male species of their own kind..." and this was one of the political parties newspapers called the People's United Party that was in government. UNIBAM sent a letter after discovering this article to clarify to the Parties position and as a government in 2007. The then PUP Prime Minister office responded with a letter UNIBAM received dated the 15th February, 2007. The letter expressed the commitment of the party and the government to the practice of non-discrimination. The government through the the Office of the Prime Minister -Said Musa said the issue of discrimination was a socio-cultural matter" and did not believe any constitutional changes would make a difference.

There is another national newspaper that is about 40 years old that started out of a social and political movement to advance the need for black people called The Amandala. There levels of homophobia can be documented as far back as 1987. In an editorial called the "People's Right To Know" written on 16/4/87. The editorial pointed out how gays and the church have "children in common." In another editorial in 19/10/97 called "*Leave the Young Boys Alone*" the writings described gay men as "*unnatural purveyors of filth and corruption and are vultures.*" On the 16/11/97 an entire page was written on homosexuality and the bible,*the writings called for* "gays to repent and make a commitment to obey God." In 1998, channel five television reported that a cruise of 900 gay men arrive from the Grand Cayman, on the same day two men were arrested engaged in an unnatural act.

On the 21/1/07 an article appeared on the front page called "*the homosexual administrator*" the article misinformed the general public about the nature of sexual orientation and made fallacious, unscientific and unnecessary sweeping generalizations that stigmatized all gay men as pederast. On the 4/2/07 a follow up was written as an editorial called "*Of Pedophiles and Hypocrites*" and it declared that Belize is ruled by gays and warns parents that gays will come for their children.

The Editorial also said that gays used the educational system and sports to harvest children. In an effort to clear up the nature of sexual orientation, I wrote the newspaper as president of UNIBAM they called me "*silly and irrational.*" This letter to the editor was sent on 7/2/07.

Then came in a Nigerian, living in Belize on the 8/2/07 who wrote a follow-up piece called "Stephen Okeke writes" to the editor and expressed his "disgust and horror" at the effort at clarifying myths about gay people. He declares that gays have chosen to be gay and assumes gays don't like his lifestyle and calls it heterophobic. He declares that a war is looming with bestiality advocates as well. He followed up with the "*Homosexual Factor*" on the 14/2/07 and called for a social up rising against people who are homosexual because we are a threat to social

balance. Other articles followed up on the 15/4/07 called the “Medical and Homosexual consequence of what homosexuals do.” Another was done on 20/5/07; 17/6/07 the article “Understanding the Homosexual Factor V: Homosexuality and Demonology-A Spiritual Prospective” was written etc. Not a single letter to the editor was ever published, beyond the one written by my organization to educate the population on all the misperceptions that was being written about gay people.

The Amandala made a review of the MILK movie this month In a story written on 29/1/09 that was written by Colin BH entitled “*From confused cowboys to Milk*” can be found at: <http://www.amandala.com.bz/index.php?id=8077>. The movie itself is about an openly gay man who gained public office in the USA and was killed by a homophobe. The article review stated that the movie will “ attempt to seduce young people” and said “*Movies that package traps for young people are not good.*” A gentle man by the name of Brent Toombs who lives in Belize and is now a Belizean expatriate from Canada wrote on the issue to the Amandala, but like a long list of other letters it was never published. Mr. Toombs letter centered on understanding the movie in a historical context of rights and tried to clarified the comments mentioned above by stating “...suggesting that this film was made to "seduce young people" into becoming gay is about as ridiculous as if I were to claim that Oliver Stone's movie, JFK, was an attempt to "seduce" people into converting to Catholicism.” In response to Brent Toombs unpublished letter a Belizean living abroad in the Unites States wrote: e “In 1998 a gay cruise was heading to Belize and the churches started to attack gays and lesbians as a result. Amandala was one of the most vicious mouthpieces for the spewing of this bigotry against Belizean gays and lesbians. There was a pall of fear that settled in on the gay community and no one wanted to respond against this horrible demonstration of hatred. I took them on, however, and lobbed a series of letters to the Amandala and the other newspapers. Amandala, of course, never published my letters but they found out who I was and proceeded to attack me in their papers, making degrading and threatening allusions to a "homosexual teacher at St. John's Junior College." They were horrible times and I found it so disheartening that a newspaper could so irresponsibly publish this kind of hatred and bigotry. I was ashamed of Belizeans also who never stood up to question this kind of dangerous irresponsibility and condemn this bigotry.I see that the Amandala has remained in the dark ages over the years...”

Reported and Non Reported Cases:

Case I- 27/5/06- Source-Reported in the Amandala and UNIBAM documents

- *In the two naked men article they were beaten by the police, humiliated and were stripped. They were not given back their clothes until half an hour later after reaching the police station. One of the victims press charges of abuse and the case is pending.*

Case II- Police Harassment-source (5/6/06) instant message saved

- *Essentially two gentlemen, Alex and Norman where enjoying the seaside near the sea of Fort George down town Belize City in a car when a police car pulled up next to them and an officer came out asking what they were doing there etc. They gave their names and then the officer proceeded to comment “mind you know, be careful!” One of the*

gentlemen replied, "why? I am just sitting here and will go home in a bit!" The policeman replied, "Is this gonna be another two naked man in a car thing again" The officer just looked at him and rode off.

Case III-Murder 20/8/06-Source Star newspaper

- *Found stabbed to death in his apartment, his family simply buried him and left without regards for the case pending.*

Case IV-Police Harassment-source- instant message saved on 28/11/06

- *This is William, he reported to me on 11/28/06 that he was just dropping off a guy because he lived right behind his mom house. When he pulled up, he saw in his mirror that there was a blue unmarked vehicle behind him passing in police/military type BDF uniforms. He reported that it seems like they were looking for drugs as they asked accordingly. He was questioned "What are you doing here?" he explained he was just dropping of his male passenger and that they had just left a party. They proceeded to search the vehicle for drugs and during the search one officer said "You guys are sodomites, that's a sin, you should read your bible." While William reported that it was just one officer making all the comments, he nevertheless thought that his attitude was unprofessional and discriminatory. The officer proceeded to inquire about his girlfriend, her name and where she lived which had no relations to the issue which was the drug search. William never reported the issue anywhere.*

Case V-Attempted Murder-Source personal interview

- *Selvyn stabbed with an ice pick on 13th, January, 2007 on Albert Street while looking to purchase food. His sister fought against one of the perpetrators while a third came from behind to inflict the injury. Apparently, while buying food a car pulled up beside the car he had gotten out off. Recognizing one of his friend's as Penny, whom he did not see for a long time he had some small talk. They embraced on the street and when one of the men in the car she was in proceeded to yell, "batty boy no touch she." After which a verbal assault ensued to which let to the attack.*

Case VI-Assault (21/1/07)-Source personal interview

- *Hugo was hit in the face with a beer bottle. It happened while he was talking to an individual on the street. The police proceeded to insult him on top of the injuries when he sought help. Though its not policy, there is a selective practice of physically and mentally" softening up individuals by certain police officers.*

Case VII- Arbitrary arrest- Source interview done on June 12th, 2007

The case involved a transgender person named ZYRA, a British citizen who perceived himself as an asexual person that was living in Santa Elena at the time. He reported that around 10:30pm on May 26th, 2007 the robbery took place and that he was strangled. He

called the police six times before the police showed up around 11:00 o'clock that night. When they arrived they took statements and was told "if you hear of extra evidence come and tell us." He eventually took a knife evidence wrapped up in a cardboard box to the police station in Cayo, when he was told while waiting, by an officer, that he had brought disease..." another started questioning his gender and sexuality. Another said "I'll make a man out of you" They proceeded to say that because he looked "funny" and that needed to detain him, proceeded to fingerprint him and withheld his passport between 3 to 5 days to see if he had a record at Interpol, during this time he was jailed from 11:00 and not release till 1:30 in the afternoon. This was despite that he had diabetes and other prisoners telling officers that he was ill

Case VIII-Transgenders deported- Source instant message dated (11/11/07)

- *On 11/11/07 it was reported to me that that Russian Transgender person came to Belize way of charter from Guatemala through a local airline Tropic Air in their trans clothing on November 2nd, 2007. Upon inspection by immigration officers of their passport they were refused entry and deported out of the country around 6:00 pm. When the Tropic Air Manager was asked why they were deported, the manager reported that they came in women's clothing and their passport was male. UNIBAM sent a letter to the Director of Immigration who replied on November 14th, 2007 that the sole reason a person would refuse entry was "if their passport was of questionable authenticity"*

Case XI-murder 20/11 2007-Source-News report

- *Two San Joaquin teenagers have been charged for the murder of a 44 year old man. 18 year olds Arturo Ek and Isair Martinez are accused of the beastly killing of fellow villager, 49-year-old Eugenio Tzul. At about 6:00 on Sunday morning, police found Tzul dead in front of his brother house; he had injuries to his head and had a piece of wire tied around his neck. Police say it appears he had also been sodomized with an antenna.*

Case X- Verbal and psychological / cultural abuse-source personal email, 25 February, 2009

- *I cannot take Belize for too long, its suffocating because of pervasive discriminatory and oppressive verbal attacks. Even when the verbal attacks are done silently as in speaking under their breaths, I can see it happening every once in a while.*
- *Once a respectable University Officer, second in command at our local university told an entire Logistics committee that he will not share his hotel room with me. He had said this because he and the faculty were fully aware that I am an openly self-identified man gay. I had worked very closely with this University Administrator and for years thought he was a strong supporter of the program I had started my work at the University. But that day I realized that my "Master Status" was that of being gay, not a University Professor. The University Administrator thought that because I was gay, I would probably be attracted to him and make an inappropriate move during our workshop in Cayo. I was very*

disappointed with him and with the entire committee for not correcting him and addressing his fallacious thinking.

- *Many times I have arrived at the Belize Philip Goldson Airport after being away for months, sometimes years studying abroad. Five minutes after touch down I get out of the plane and touch Belizean soil, a land in which I am a citizen with all rights and privileges. Yet before I step outside the airport I hear the verbal whispers and teasing, the mockery imitating how I speak to the bag helper or customs man. Often times I have felt to jump back into the plane and never coming back to this place we call Belize. That day is coming soon. Source: Alex*

Case XI-Assault-Source email received 25th February, 2009

- *About 12 years ago gentleman known as KAYA was close friends with a guy. The guy's father did not like the friendship between his son and the self identified gay man, Kaya. The father eventually took kerosene or gasoline and threw it on Kaya then lit him on fire. Kaya can still show you the scars. This happened in Orange Walk Town.*

Case XII-general discrimination-source personal interview done on 25/2/09

- *Two lesbian parents wanted to enter their child into a school in 2004, but were denied permission based on the sexual orientation of the parents. Some of the problems faced by both parents happened while they attended PTA meeting. They were asked why the child's father was missing etc. The child was asked by his peers "Why do you have two moms?and was eventually told he will be gay due to his gay parents etc. Over three months the Ministry of Education intervened since the child was six at the time and the child was accepted. The mother had to explain to the Ministry that her sexuality had nothing to do with the fact that her child with the fact that her child has the right to an education free from discrimination and harm.*

Case XIII- Education Discrimination-Source Personal interview 25th February 2009

- *Now 27 Paul related a story on how his high school tried to find a reason to remove him from school because he was gay in 2000 in 3rd form. He shared that the only reason that he was not thrown out was because he had good grades.*

Case XIII- Health Discrimination-Source AIDS Links newsletter issue 14, 2009 and Prison Report.

- *The newsletter highlighted a prison report done in 2003 that 11.8% of male inmates had forced penetrative sex between four to six times. The prison report stated that 4.3% of male prisoners engaged in sex while in prison. The sexual activity in prison highlights a dilemma with government delivering preventative health as section 53 of the criminal code makes same sex activity illegal, but government also has a priority to prevent the transmission of HIV. If the prison chooses to distribute condoms officially, it's in theory, an accessory to a crime. The question is which is more important the sexual and*

reproductive rights of prisoners and their right to health or is government priority crime control?