Malawi on My Mind

May 21, 2010 By Tim Horn

If you aren't already enraged on personal and human rights levels by the sentencing of two Malawian men, Steven Monjeza (left) and Tiwonge Chimbalanga (right), to 14 years of hard labor in prison after being convicted for "carnal knowledge against the order of nature," consider the disastrous implications this tragedy of a case has on the global response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The basic facts of the case are hard enough to swallow. Monjeza, 26, and Tiwonge, 20, were arrested on December 28 after celebrating their engagement ahead of a wedding planned for this year. On Tuesday and Thursday of this week, presiding judge Nyakwawa Usiwa-Usiwa handed down his conviction and sentence.

According to BBC News, Usiwa-Usiwa told the pair: "I will give you a scaring sentence so that the public be protected from people like you, so that we are not tempted to emulate this horrendous example." Adding insult to tragedy, some of the hundreds of spectators who packed the courtroom and gathered outside shouted: "You got what you deserve!" and "Fourteen years is not enough, they should get 50!"

The grotesque spectacle in Malawi is hardly an African one-off. Intolerance is burning in parts of the continent, notably in countries where--perhaps coincidentally--there has been a rise in evangelical church movements condemning homosexuality. Indeed, homosexuality is outlawed in 38 African countries. In Mauritania, Sudan and northern Nigeria, it is punishable by death. And in Uganda, where offenders

currently face life imprisonment, legislation making homosexuality punishable by death is forging ahead, despite mass protests and condemnation from the international community.

These draconian laws--the very definition of anachronism--aren't just diabolical violations of international human rights, they may also spell disaster for HIV/AIDS prevention programs in sub-Saharan Africa. Michel Kazatchkine, MD, PhD, executive director of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria sums it up best in a press release generated yesterday:

The criminalization of individuals based on their sexual orientation is not just a human rights issue - it also undermines investment in HIV and AIDS as it drives sexual behavior underground and creates an environment where HIV can more easily spread. This ultimately affects the broader population, in addition to the devastating impact it has on communities of men who have sex with men". In southern Africa more than 50% of men who have sex with men also have sex with women. A recent study shows high levels of bisexual behavior in Malawi.

Where do we go from here? We can begin by showing the same degree of outrage we have felt for anti-

marriage equality and don’t-ask-don’t-tell legislation and policies in the United States--and, no, I don’t mean simply asking Madonna to get involved. The situation in Malawi, Uganda and elsewhere takes the frequent “life-and-death” arguments used to fight anti-gay legislation to a whole other level.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/malawi-on-my-mind