

Ugandan gay activist honored with human rights award

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(ENInews)--Religious leaders in Uganda have responded from conservative and liberal perspectives to the news that Kasha Jacqueline Nabagesera, a Ugandan gay rights activist, was given on 3 May the Martin Ennals Awards for Human Rights Defenders.

The award, given by the Martin Ennals Foundation in honor of the first secretary general of Amnesty International, will help the campaign for minority group rights in the East African country, said retired Anglican bishop Christopher Senyonjo. "It is appropriate and encouraging ... We now know there are people who understand what we are suffering from and support our position," he said on 6 May in a telephone interview with ENInews.

However, conservative church leaders criticized the award, saying it went to a "disgraceful ground," where the recipient is not a hero. They have charged that homosexuality is evil; and is rejected by the scriptures and African communities.

"We are outraged ... but not surprised. This is a public embarrassment There is nothing to celebrate," said the Rev. Martin Ssempe, a Pentecostal pastor, who has been crusading against homosexuality in Uganda. He accused the West of forcing its practices on Africa. "We pray that Kasha is changed so that she can help the other gay people change their ways," he said.

Senyonjo, however, noted that being gay "is not a matter of choice." He added, referring to some church leaders, that "it takes time to understand it and I think they need a lot of education." Ugandan church leaders have been challenging homosexuals to repent and seek forgiveness, but Senyonjo said the main tenets of the Gospel were to

love those whom you do not understand, and persecuting them was ungodly.

Nabagesera is the founder and Executive Director of Freedom and Roam Uganda, a lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender (LGBT) rights organization which works in a country where homosexual acts are illegal and can be punished by long jail terms.

Those opposed to homosexuality have been seeking even stiffer penalties. The Ugandan legislature has been considering a bill that proposes life imprisonment for homosexual acts and death penalty for a form called "aggravated homosexuality." The bill says this will occur if one of the participants is a minor, HIV-positive, disabled or a hardcore criminal.

The award, which was created in 1993, is granted annually "to someone who has demonstrated an exceptional record of combating human rights violations by courageous and innovative means," according to the foundation website. It "aims at encouraging human rights defenders who are at risk and therefore in need of immediate protection. This protective publicity requires media attention, particularly in the country of origin of the laureate." The award carries a prize of at least 20,000 Swiss francs, to be used for further work in the field of human rights.

The ten organisations (including the German faith group Diakonie) that make up the award's jury said Nabagesera was courageous and faced harassment because of her work. She has had the courage to appear on national television in Uganda, has issued press statements on behalf of the gay community, and spoke on several radio stations, said the citation.

In January, Nabagesera's colleague, David Kato, was murdered three months after a Ugandan tabloid, published a list of what it claimed were Ugandan gays and called for their hanging. Nabagesera's name appeared on the list.