Beat: Travel

Botswana denies it seeks to detain gay men under draft policy

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USPA News - A proposed policy as part of efforts to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS in the African nation of Botswana does not aim to target or detain gay men, a government spokesman said on Tuesday, rejecting local and international media reports. The health ministry conducted a survey earlier this year with the objective of determining the prevalence of HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia among groups determined to be at a high risk, namely female sex workers, gay men, and drug users.

The survey also sought to determine the size of these groups in three districts of Botswana. In a draft document that was obtained by local journalists last month, the ministry said the study estimated there are approximately 2,722 female sex workers in the capital Gaborone and 1,065 in Francistown. It determined HIV prevalence among this group - 34 percent of them foreigners - to be 61.9 percent. Police and immigration officials later met with health representatives to discuss the results of the survey and agreed to take action, although the document did not clearly indicate it was only referring to the group of female sex workers. "Section 179 of the penal code will be used," the document said, pointing to a section that also punishes `any indecent act.` However, the draft document specifically referred to subsection A of Section 179 that applies only to prostitutes. It continued by outlining plans for a 6-month-long police operation in partnership with immigration officials to arrest and charge offenders, although the document did not make clear it was referring only to female sex workers. It said foreign female sex workers would be deported. Government spokesman Jeff Ramsay on Tuesday rejected the "misleading reports" in the local press that were picked up by international media. "The Government of Botswana wishes to once more reaffirm that it has no intent, much less strategy in place, to arrest, detain, deport or otherwise unduly target gay people as part of ongoing efforts to curb HIV/AIDS," he said. Ramsay clarified that all references to detention or deportation were "entirely confined" to the issue of female sex workers and emphasized that the draft document had not yet been approved. "To reiterate, there is no mention whatsoever in the document about detaining or deporting gay persons," he said, adding that the government has no intention to target gay people "as an HIV/AIDS strategy." The Botswana Network on Ethics, Law and HIV/AIDS (BONELA) reacted in anger last month when the draft document leaked, saying the organization had worked with the government to find female sex workers, gay men, and drug users to participate in the survey. It said it cooperated in the belief the findings would be used to create "an inclusive and accomodative environment." "The Botswana government has now done what is totally unexpected and deviated from the study findings by taking punitive, discriminatory, homophobic and xenophobic measures. That is unethical!" said BONELA Executive Director Uyapo Ndadi. "BONELA views that she was used to sell the rights of these groups." Same-sex sexual activity is illegal in Botswana and is punishable by up to 7 years in prison, but prosecutions are believed to be rare. The government amended the country`s Employment Act in August 2010 to remove sexual orientation and health as a basis for dismissal, meaning gay people can no longer be fired solely on the basis of their sexual orientation. But despite the progress, the subject remains a taboo and same-sex couples have no legal recognition. The deputy speaker of the Botswana National Assembly said in February 2011 he would have gay people killed if he had the power, saying: "On this point I would agree with Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe who once described that behavior as that of Western dogs. I don`t like those gay people and will never tolerate them. They are demonic and evil."

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