

## Should U.S. gay groups adopt a broader scope?

Recent violence in Russia triggers criticism

Friday, June 15, 2007

By ELIZABETH PERRY

Violence at Gay Pride parades in Russia, Romania and Poland has some U.S. activists questioning the role both domestic and international gay rights groups should play in responding to similar incidents abroad in the future.

The International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission, a U.S. based non-profit, has issued press releases condemning the violence at Moscow Gay Pride protests for two years in a row and the most recent violence at a Pride parade in Bucharest. It has also spoken out about numerous international incidents involving violence and discrimination directed at gays.

The group says it exists to provide assistance to gay rights groups in various countries where discrimination persists through advocacy, documentation, coalition building, public education and technical assistance, but some observers are questioning the effectiveness of those methods.

Moscow Pride organizer Nikolai Alekseev said he thinks IGLHRC will have no effect on Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov's decision to ban parades there. He said IGLHRC turned down invitations to observe the last two parades because it did not meet its fundraising goals.

"Send us a House representative. Send us a senator," Alekseev said. "By sending officials you will make a difference. This will prevent the authorities from allowing the police and the fascists to beat us. But it's not a press release that will change anything, especially when the event has passed."

In response to the violent clash May 27 between anti-gay groups and gay rights activists protesting a ban on Pride parades in Moscow, two groups of gay activists in New York and San Francisco launched a Russian vodka boycott on June 5. Organizer Brendan Fay in New York joined gay activists at a "Vigil of Solidarity" in front of the Russian Embassy in New York. Gay activist Michael Petrelis led another vigil in San Francisco outside the Russian consulate there and both groups poured Stolichnaya vodka down gutters.

The protesters are asking Americans not to drink Stolichnaya, or "Stoli" vodka, as a statement to end repression and violence against the Russian gay community. The activists are hoping Stoli, a popular Russian brand, will issue a statement condemning the violence.

After the demonstration, Petrelis told the Blade that NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, Human Rights Campaign and IGLHRC have valuable roles to play in responding to international human rights violations, but said they are not doing enough.

"I fear the bigger issue may be HRC and [the Task Force] can't see beyond their borders to the plight of so many LGBT people on other continents," he said. "IGLHRC and Human Rights Watch are supremely uninterested in working with activists who can and do stage protests or vigils."

**Matt Foreman, executive director of the Task Force, said his organization is not reluctant to get its hands dirty on the front lines of the gay rights battle, but said the Task Force's mission is to build grassroots support among gays in the U.S., not to have a formal role in responding to anti-gay violence in other countries. He called the violence in Moscow "appalling" and said the real question is how U.S. organizations can put pressure on other countries without having those efforts backfire against gays who live there.**

**Foreman added that issuing statements isn't likely to have dramatic impact.**

**"I really doubt Moscow Mayor Luzhkov, Iranian President Ahmadinejad or Nigerian President Obasanjo give a damn what American LGBT groups have to say," Foreman said.**

HRC declined to comment for this story.

Paula Ettelbrick, executive director of IGLHRC, said having U.S. based groups show up in Russia will not do much of anything to help advance gay rights and said a more strategic response is needed.

"We work in collaboration with gay activist leaders in their home countries," she said. "We play a supportive role with the folks in Moscow and firmly believe activists should lead their own protests. We sent a letter to the mayor asking to uphold human rights."

Scott Long, director of the Human Rights Watch Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Rights Project, said his organization does a good deal of work that is not made public. Some of those tasks involve providing public lawyers to prisoners, supplying supportive information for court cases and trying to build bridges between activists and human rights organizations that don't take up human rights cases. He said some work is done quietly with organizations in countries where local prejudices or political positions could put activists in danger.

Mark Bromley, director of external relations and policy for Global Rights, said his organization works with other NGOs to raise the profile in Washington of international gay rights issues in other countries. He said the U.S. government and its embassies should follow the European Union's lead and speak out more routinely about gay rights issues abroad, indicating raising awareness is a big part of the effort.

"The state department issues a human rights report every year on every country in the world except us," he said. "Over the past couple of years there has been very good reporting on human rights, but no follow up on the senior levels of the state department."