

In Mexico City, Ramadoss champions gay rights

Favouring the rights of homosexuals, Health Minister Anbumani Ramadoss has sought the removal of provisions in the Indian Penal Code (IPC) that classifies sex between two men as a criminal offence.

'Section 377 of the IPC, which criminalises men who have sex with men, must go,' Ramadoss said at the 17th International Conference on Aids in Mexico City, a ministry spokesman said here Friday.

Under the IPC, sex between two men is considered 'unnatural'. The Delhi High Court is hearing a petition by Naz Foundation, an NGO that has challenged arrests under the act. Though the health ministry had supported their call to remove the law, the home ministry was not in favour of it.

Considering the matter to be 'serious', the court had asked the two ministries to sit together and sort out the matter. The case would be heard next on Sep 18.

In his speech at the global AIDS summit, Ramadoss said: 'Structural discrimination against those who are vulnerable to HIV such as sex workers and men having sex with men must be removed if our prevention, care and treatment programmes are to succeed.

'The key to overcoming the HIV epidemic is to take HIV services to those on the margins of society and we can only do that in an enabling environment.'

The minister said India's dedicated focus on HIV prevention is fetching dividends. 'We are seeing the beginning of the stabilisation of the HIV epidemic in India.'

He, however, said India should not be 'complacent'.

The country's targeted HIV intervention approach, which relies on strong community participation, has resulted in larger numbers of people accessing HIV prevention, treatment and care services, he added.

India has about 2.5 million HIV infected people and many states have started recording a stabilisation of the epidemic, Ramadoss said.

However, he added that new hotspots were emerging in northern India, particularly in the rural interiors, which are home to thousands of migrants who work outside their states in India's economic hubs like [Mumbai](#) and Surat.

Sujatha Rao, director-general of the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO), said initiatives that address the unique needs of migrants must be immediately launched to avert a potential rise of HIV infections among them.

She said India has begun a massive scale up of prevention care and treatment strategies to achieve universal coverage by 2011.

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