

## Nepal police assault youths for carrying condoms

On the day Nepal's MPs and rights activists were to interact with the gay community and discuss the inclusion of their rights in a new constitution, the police assaulted and stripped five young men in a park here because they were carrying condoms.

'Five men, whose ages are between 19 and 25, were sitting in Ratna Park (Saturday) evening when they were accosted by four policemen led by a sub-inspector,' said Sunil Pant, president of Blue Diamond Society (BDS), Nepal's only gay rights organisation.

'Though the men were metis (transgenders who prefer to dress as women), they were not in drag but dressed in jeans and T-shirts,' Pant said.

'However, the policemen made them strip naked and searched their bags. When they found condoms in the bags, they first abused the men, accused them of being sex workers and began beating them up with batons,' he added.

One of the five managed to run out of the park and call a BDS official, who was also roughed up when he tried to intervene.

'Alex Chamling (an HIV/AIDS educator at BDS) was badly beaten up when he tried to stop the policemen from assaulting the youths,' Pant said.

Though Chamling dialled 100 for help and two policemen arrived on the spot, Pant said they remained 'silent spectators'.

The incident came on the day BDS, with the help of the Dutch government, was scheduled to hold a meeting between metis and politicians from Nepal's leading parties as well as human rights activists.

With the multi-party government having pledged to hold an election in November, to be followed by a new constitution, Nepal's lesbian, gay and transgender community is lobbying to have the new statute protect gay rights.

In Nepal's feudal society, where sons are preferred to daughters, homosexuality is taboo. Though the gay community supported the pro-democracy movement last year that ended King Gyanendra's 15-month direct rule, it has not received any support from the new multi-party government.

Policemen regularly harass and assault gays, organisations refuse them jobs and their families disown them.

The Maoist guerrillas, who are now in the government, are anti-gay, terming the community perverts and an aberration.

Saturday's assault coincided with the Nepal visit of two officials of the New York-based Human Rights Watch.

This year, for the first time, the HRW is compiling a report on the state of gay rights in Nepal and the plight of the community.

'It was shocking,' said HRW's Scott Long, who spoke with some of the victims. 'We also spoke to the police and they admitted that they make a regular practice of beating up metis. It's a major human rights issue.'

Long also said that the police attitude that carrying condoms was illegal and tantamount to prostitution was 'a threat to the health of everyone in Nepal'.

'The constitutional revision process is offering a real opportunity for change to all the marginalised sections,' he added.

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