



US Joins Global Gay Effort

By: DOUG IRELAND
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In its first significant pro-gay initiative, the Obama administration has informed the French government that it will sign the declaration made to the United Nations General Assembly by some 66 nations in favor of the universal decriminalization of homosexuality.

The Bush administration had refused to endorse the declaration, which was read from the podium of the General Assembly this past December 18. (See this reporter's December 24, 2008-January 5, 2009 article "An Historic Day at the UN").

The news broke in the US in an Associated Press dispatch that moved on the AP wire on the evening of March 17, citing a high State Department official who requested anonymity because Congress was still in the process of being informed.

But the father of the declaration, Professor Louis-Georges Tin, founder and president of the Paris-based International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO), told Gay City News by telephone from Paris that he had been informed of the US decision several days previously by French Foreign Ministry officials.

"We are, of course, extremely pleased and delighted that the Obama administration has decided to sign and endorse the declaration," Tin said. "Now what we need is for Washington to actively use its influence with its allies, friends, and partners to get those governments which have not yet endorsed the declaration to sign it. For example, the Pacific nations could easily be brought on board as signatories if the Obama administration asked them to do so."

On March 18, US State Department spokesman Robert Wood told reporters that the Obama administration had formally endorsed the declaration.

"The United States is an outspoken defender of human rights and critic of human rights abuses around the world," Wood told assembled journalists at a press conference, adding, "As such, we join with other supporters of this statement, and we will continue to remind countries of the importance of respecting the human rights of all people in all appropriate international fora."

The idea for a statement of principle by the United Nations in support of decriminalizing homosexuality globally was the brainchild of Tin, and the campaign for such a declaration was launched in November 2006, when IDAHO unveiled a list of hundreds of VIPs who supported it, including five Nobel Prize winners, ten Pulitzer Prize winners, two former French prime ministers, and six Academy Award winners (see this reporter's November 21-27, 2006 article "Bold Move for UN Action").

Last May, after a year-long lobbying campaign by IDAHO and an alliance of French LGBT groups spanning the political spectrum from right to left, the French government promised to use its six-month term last year in the rotating presidency of the European Union to push for "a European initiative calling for the universal decriminalization of homosexuality," according to a statement released by Minister Of Human Rights Rama Yade (see this reporter's May 22-28, 2008 article "France Fights for Decriminalization").

Eventually, all 27 member countries of the European Union were among the 66 nations that signed the declaration, recognizing and supporting LGBT Rights and entitled "Statement on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity."

While the declaration was not submitted to the UN General Assembly for a vote, that is the ultimate goal of the working group of nations.

The Obama administration's decision to reverse the Bush administration position and endorse the UN declaration is all the more noteworthy because the principal US national LGBT groups, like the Human Rights Campaign and the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**, have generally refused to take up international LGBT issues, claiming their "mission" is limited to domestic concerns. Though they criticized the Bush administration's intransigence on the declaration in December, neither HRC nor NGLTF lobbied the Obama administration to support the statement.

France is continuing to campaign for support for the declaration by convening an international conference on homophobia to be held on May 15, in deliberate proximity to the International Day Against Homophobia, which is celebrated each year on May 17, the anniversary of the date in 1993 when the World Health Organization (WHO) removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders.

The international conference on homophobia is being convened by French Human Rights Minister Yade, who has promised to pay the travel expenses of some 400 people from around the globe or secure travel funding from the nations represented at the meeting, Tin told this reporter.

Last fall, as Gay City News reported, it was feared that Yade would be sacked by French President Nicolas Sarkozy over a domestic political issue. Sarkozy had wanted Yade to head his conservative UMP party's list of candidates for the European Parliament in the Paris region, but Yade had angered Sarkozy when she refused, because doing so would inevitably lead to her election and she would have been required to give up her ministry in order to serve in the EuroParliament at Strasbourg.

Now, the photogenic Yade, who is of African descent, is the most popular minister in Sarkozy's government, according to the most recent opinion polls, and her post seems secure for the moment. This means that this proactively LGBT-friendly minister will be able to help lead the next stage in the campaign for the UN declaration, which will begin when Sweden, an historically gay-friendly nation, assumes the rotating European Union presidency in June.

At that time, Tin told Gay City News, work will begin on crafting a formal resolution for global decriminalization that will be presented for a vote to the UN General Assembly, and on recruiting commitments to vote in its favor from member countries.

IDAHO is an all-volunteer organization with virtually no budget, and so the success of the UN decriminalization declaration since IDAHO first introduced the notion and launched the campaign for it more than two years ago is that much more remarkable.

Tin and IDAHO are already planning to launch a new international declaration, this time in favor of transgender rights. Entitled "Reject Transphobia, Respect Gender Identity," the statement will be an appeal addressed to the United Nations, the WHO, and governments around the world, and will be unveiled at a Paris press conference several days before this year's annual May 17 IDAHO events.

This new statement will include a call for the WHO to stop considering transpeople as mentally disordered; for the UN's human rights bodies to examine the human rights abuses faced by transpeople around the world; and for governments to adopt the Yogyakarta Principles in favor of LGBT rights and to insure that all transpeople benefit from health care, including the right to gender reassignment if they wish it, and the right to adapt their civil status to their preferred

gender.

"Of course it will be harder to get support for transpeople than it was for universal decriminalization of homosexuality," Tin told Gay City News, "but that is precisely why we must embrace this cause and these people, who are globally victims of so much discrimination."

An online petition in support of the new declaration on transgender rights will be launched on the IDAHO website, at idahomophobia.net/, in English and French, on May 17.