

**W**ith the likes of Jesse Helms in a legislative leadership position and a conservative U.S. Supreme Court about to consider the constitutionality of Colorado's discriminatory Amendment 2, it's sometimes hard to remember that the struggle for gay and lesbian equality extends beyond this nation's borders.

But it does, and in many parts of the world the challenges faced by sexual minorities are consistently life-threatening. Just consider this: In Iran homosexuality is punishable by death. In Mexico, Columbia and Brazil, gangs—which some say are government-sanctioned—roam the streets disposing of those deemed "socially undesirable": street youth, gay men and lesbians, and transvestites. In Saudi Arabia one can be sent to prison for life for committing a crime of sodomy. In Burma prostitutes with HIV are injected with cyanide.

"I think it is critical we remember that sexual minorities globally are often living under very difficult circumstances," explains Jorge Cortiñas, who heads up the San Francisco-based International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. Founded in 1991, IGLHRC monitors and documents human rights abuses against sexual minorities and people with HIV and AIDS.

"Traditional human rights groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch simply ignored abuses against sexual minorities," explains Cortiñas, who recently spoke at Portland-area colleges. "IGLHRC was created to fill this void and to mobilize opposition to these abuses."

According to Cortiñas, IGLHRC has developed a global network of activists. "We don't just step in and protest unless we have a contact in that country. If we did, it could cause more harm than good," he says.

So how does IGLHRC receive its information or requests for support?

"We may get a fax from abroad or someone will call us collect from another country. Or there may be a wire service story that something is happening to gays in China or Iran," he says. "If we don't have a contact there, we'll do a little digging to see if we can connect with a gay or traditional human rights activist. It's essentially old-fashioned investigative work."

According to Cortiñas, IGLHRC is working with activists in several countries; its internal advisory board includes representatives from more than 30 countries. To foster more efficient communications, the commission has donated computers and other equipment to organizations in Russia, Asia, Latin America, Africa, Mexico, Peru, India, Romania and Russia. It sends a newsletter detailing HIV/AIDS treatment information to groups in several other countries and sends out "activist alerts" detailing abuses.

Not surprisingly, the agency, which has a paid staff of three, is inundated with requests for support. At any single time, IGLHRC is investigating several dozen incidents. "But, of course, situations where a gay person's life is at immediate risk take precedence over other cases," Cortiñas says.

For instance, IGLHRC is currently trying to end what he describes as the "social cleansing" of sexual minorities in Brazil, Columbia and Mexico.

"There appears to be a wave of violence against

transvestites, gays and other people who are viewed as 'socially undesirable,' in these countries. What we're hearing is that groups of vigilantes are going out and executing these people with the consent of local law enforcement and government officials," he says.

Other projects at the top of IGLHRC's list right now include efforts to include lesbian-related issues at an international conference on women's issues to be held later this year in China, and a vigorous effort to dismantle a Romanian sodomy law which Cortiñas says is being enforced against sexual minorities.

A continuing concern of the commission involves immigration and asylum issues. It has set up

The case involved a Brazilian gay man who feared he would be killed because of his sexual orientation. Government guidelines state that religion, race, nationality, political opinion, and particular social group are the categories under which one can apply for asylum. In 1993, a judge ruled that sexual orientation fell under "particular social group." With that decision, the United States joined a handful of other countries in defining "particular social group" to include sexual minorities.

Additionally, that same year IGLHRC successfully lobbied for the inclusion of lesbian and gay persecution in the State Department's annual human rights report to Congress. The commis-

that our policies—and the policies of other governments—have a direct impact on sexual minorities."

**C**ortiñas, meanwhile, wasn't the only person in Portland recently to advocate for international cooperation and understanding among sexual minorities.

Vladimir Kabakov is a Russian gay man who is currently working with the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches to translate church materials into the Russian language.

Kabakov spoke before members of Portland's Metropolitan Community Church, which specializes in outreach to sexual minorities, about the status of gay men and lesbians in Russia.

"Things are hard, but not only for gays and lesbians," says Kabakov, who adds Russia's ongoing transformation from a communist to a capitalist state has been difficult. "Many of our difficulties stem from this transformation. Inflation is very high, and people are worried."

According to Kabakov, the economic, political and cultural instability faced by Russians has led to an increase in fascist activity, which poses a serious threat to diverse groups of people.

Human rights activists also say Russia routinely imprisons gay men and classifies lesbianism as a type of schizophrenia. IGLHRC reports that even today gay men and lesbians receive drug and electroshock treatment simply because of their sexual orientation.

Additionally, the Russian parliament recently approved a measure that would require those visiting the country for more than three months to produce certificates proving they are HIV-free. Deputies in the State Duma, the lower house of parliament, voted 276-0 (with three abstentions) to pass the draft, which must be signed by President Boris Yeltsin before it becomes law. The vote is likely to raise a storm of protest from lesbian and gay activist groups and western embassies, who say the legislation infringes on human rights and is medically senseless.

"For those who were educated in the old communist system, it's hard to make them free their minds," says Kabakov. "They still think to be gay is to need a cure. But many people still feel that way around the world."

Kabakov stresses that things have gotten a bit better for Russian gay men and lesbians. He cites the recent opening of a gay and lesbian bar in Moscow. "Though the prices are high," Kabakov says it's a good place for people to meet and network.

"Our country is in a new beginning. Though things are hard, we have hope," says the 58-year-old energy engineer. "[The Russian gay and lesbian community] invites Americans to come and visit us. We would love to meet you and show you our country. We would love to work together with you."

For more information about global human rights efforts, contact IGLHRC, 1360 Mission Street, Suite 200, San Francisco, CA 94103; (415) 255-8680.

## Beyond our borders

Recent visitors to Portland remind us that the struggle for sexual minority rights is a global one

by Inga Sorensen



Vladimir Kabakov (right) with Robyn Hixon, one of his U.S. sponsors, in Portland

an Asylum Law Project, a watchdog group that researches and documents human rights violations against sexual minorities who may seek asylum. This documentation is critical for those seeking asylum because they must offer evidence of persecution. Without the correlating documentation, many countries—including the United States—will typically deny an asylum request.

The project has sponsored several fact-finding trips abroad, and the information gathered is disseminated to immigration lawyers, the media, and activists.

Two years ago IGLHRC was instrumental in getting U.S. officials—for the first time in this nation's history—to grant political asylum to someone based on sexual-orientation grounds.

sion has also organized a QueerCorps, whose volunteer members spend a few months on fact-finding trips to other countries where they connect with local activists.

Yet, despite the organization's growth and successes, Cortiñas says he remains a little wary given the current political climate in the United States.

"We've got a Congress that seems to be promoting a sense of isolationism we haven't seen

in decades," he says. "This is a time when we should be joining with the rest of the world, not running away from it."

He adds: "Like most United States citizens, I think gays and lesbians are largely unaware of what's happening globally. We must remember

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