

# AND JUSTICE FOR ALL?

Amnesty International targets human rights abuses in the so-called 'land of the free' by Gip Plaster

Amnesty International officials say they plan to take a look into human rights violations committed by the United States.

Although gay and lesbian issues are mentioned in the group's recently-released report entitled *United States of America: Rights for All*—in which Amnesty International announces its intention to look into U.S. violations—they are not among the five areas that will be the organization's main focus.

Those five areas deal with: violations in U.S. prisons; detention of those seeking asylum; police brutality; policies regarding the death penalty; and the country's ways of dealing with other nations.

The report claims the United States commits human rights violations against its own citizens as well as citizens of other countries around the world. Gay and lesbian issues, however, do not play a major role in the report, despite the

fact that sodomy laws remain on the books in nearly two dozen states.

Such laws represent discrimination against gay men and lesbians that is written into law. Thirty-nine states do not have nondiscrimination policies, representing an absence of a law that could protect members of the sexual minorities community.

Janice Christensen, director of Amnesty's U.S. violations project, says the five areas for study enumerate violations that impact people from all ethnic and minority groups, rather than violations targeted at one specific group.

"What we tried to do is cover issues that if we did address would remedy a situation for everyone," she adds.

For example, she says, helping to end police brutality would be a step forward in rights not just for gay men and lesbians, but for all people who suffer police brutality.

Sodomy laws are mentioned in the report's

introduction, and a section of the chapter on police brutality is devoted to abuse against gay men and lesbians.

Despite the lack of emphasis on gay issues in the publication, Amnesty International is beginning a new, fully-funded project to address gay and lesbian matters.

Michael Heflin, the director of the new project, says there is a reason gay and lesbian issues are not more prominent in the organization's agenda.

He says all of Amnesty's work is couched in terms of a four-part mandate: to help prisoners of conscience; to abolish torture and execution; to ensure fair trials for political prisoners; and to assist asylum seekers. The mandate is Amnesty's mission, and Heflin says everything the group does should be related to that mission.

He also notes *United States of America: Rights for All* is only an overview report about



Amnesty's look at violations in this country.

Papers on specific aspects of the violations, which will also contain more details about what people can do to combat these violations, will be issued throughout the year. He says he is pushing for fuller coverage of gay and lesbian issues in one of those papers.

"We're hoping that we can do a lot more now that we have the resources," Heflin says, pointing out that the organization is still developing its strategic plan for dealing with lesbian and gay issues.

He adds he'd like to see Amnesty eventually work in partnership with domestic organizations like the Human Rights Campaign, a national gay and lesbian rights group based in Washington, D.C.

The 105th Congress adjourned Oct. 21, leaving little anti-gay legislation in its wake.

A high point came Aug. 5 when the House voted down the Hefley amendment by a 252-175 vote. The measure would have rolled back President Bill Clinton's executive order prohibiting sexual orientation discrimination in the federal workplace.

"It was an incredible victory, it certainly was historic," says Winnie Stachelberg, political director of the Human Rights Campaign, a national gay and lesbian political group based in Washington, D.C.

She adds, "It was the first time the House of Representatives, and a fairly conservative House at that, has made it clear that discrimination against gays and lesbians is not to be tolerated."

Log Cabin Republicans head Rich Tafel joined in calling the vote historic.

Perhaps a dozen Republicans consistently vote in support of gay and lesbian issues, but on the Hefley amendment that number swelled to 63, and, notes Tafel, "key conservative Republicans spoke up for us" on the floor of the House.

"It sent a message to the leadership of the party that when they bring up these things they are going to get their hands burned," he says.

# SO-SO STATUS QUO

The good news is there's not a lot of bad news to report about the recently-adjourned 105th Congress by Bob Roehr



Winnie Stachelberg

The House did approve the anti-gay Riggs amendment by two votes. The proposal sought to block a requirement by the city of San Francisco that companies doing business with it offer domestic partner benefits. The House also adopt-

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—Winnie Stachelberg

ed the L'Argent amendment, which had the effect of blocking joint adoptions by lesbian and gay male couples in the District of Columbia.

The Senate, however, never considered these measures, which were dropped during bud-

get negotiations between the two chambers and the White House.

Stachelberg says, "While we haven't moved backwards, we haven't moved forward either."

She says she is disappointed the federal Hate Crimes Prevention Act did not pass—even after the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard. Stachelberg hopes that measure, as well as the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, will see success come the next Congress.

Nearly 20 ambassadors were confirmed—but not San Francisco businessman James Hormel, the nominee for Luxembourg, who would be the nation's first openly gay ambassador. Senate leaders have blocked his confirmation for months due in part to his sexual orientation.

HIV and AIDS programs received "an unprecedented level of new funding," says Jeff Jacobs, director of government affairs at the AIDS Action Council.

Cornelius Baker, executive director of the National Association of People With AIDS, also praised the increases in funding, but his disappointments include the administration's backing down on funding needle-exchange programs to reduce transmission of HIV, and Congress's imposition of a ban on local funding of those programs in the District of Columbia.

The 106th Congress opens in January.

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