

Article 209 of the Austrian penal code states, "A man over 19 years of age who engages in same-sex lewdness with a person who has attained the age of 14 but not yet the age of 18 shall be punished with imprisonment from six months to five years." The law is enforced routinely, including a recent case in which a 19-year-old man was arrested for having sex with his 16-year-old boyfriend.

CZECH REPUBLIC

The Czech government has drafted a new gay partnership law and will introduce it in Parliament before July. Many rights of matrimony would be granted by the legislation, but not the right to adopt children.

HONG KONG

Hong Kong's first mainstream ad campaign aimed at gays was launched by the Sunday phone company this month.

According to Singapore's *The Straits Times*, one ad shows three men in revealing dress with one kneeling beside the words "You can't miss this opportunity." The Chinese character for "opportunity" is pronounced "gay" in Cantonese and has come to mean "homosexual" as well.

The ad also urges customers to be "happy together," which is the title of a gay movie by Hong Kong director Wong Kar Wai. "This is a very good way of testing how tolerant the public is of this kind of message and recognizing that there is a gay community here," said Jeffrey Yu Pui Man, Association of Accredited Advertising Agencies of Hong Kong chairman.

SOMALIA

A lesbian couple were sentenced to death Feb. 19 in Bossaso for "exercising unnatural behavior," according to numerous reports by Somali and international media.

The women reportedly were convicted under the Somali Criminal Punishment Law, which is based on Islamic Sharia law. Bossaso is a port city in the autonomous northeast Puntland region, where most executions reportedly are by firing squad.

The news reports said the unnamed women were arrested when one of them complained to police that the other refused to pay for her medical care after infecting her with a sexually transmitted disease. According to the BBC, hundreds of spectators cheered when the judge handed down the death sentences.

Meanwhile, Puntland police denied Feb. 23 that any of the reported events had occurred, one Somali newspaper reportedly printed a retraction, and the BBC said it had been unable to confirm its earlier reports. The U.N. Integrated Regional Information Network responded to the retraction by saying it knows who the women are and where they are jailed.

MEXICO

About 200 gay couples held a mass commitment ceremony Feb. 15 in front of Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts. About 3,000 spectators and guests attended the event.

"What we are asking for is recognition of our right to be different, of our relations," said Eno Uranga, an openly gay member of the Mexico City Legislative Assembly.

Armando Quintero of the Democratic Revolution Party added, "We are fighting to defend human and civic rights against reactionary, homophobic and macho groups and against some leaders of the Catholic Church."

Participant Mirka Negroni said, "It's time that people realize that the traditional nuclear family isn't the only thing out there."

Roman Catholic Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera denounced the event as "a carnival" staged by people who are "confused about

the sexuality that God has given them."

Two gay partnership measures are pending before the assembly. One grants gay couples equal rights in inheritance and social security; the other gives gay couples almost all rights of matrimony.

The measures have been denounced by the Pro-Life Association as "an assassination attempt against the family," according to *The Arizona Republic*.

Activists gathered Feb. 3 and 4 in Aguascalientes to create a communications network for organizers of gay pride celebrations. Delegates attended the conference from Aguascalientes, Mexico City, Monterrey, Tijuana and Pachuca.

"Last-minute planning and a lack of economic resources were the determining factors that prevented a majority of Mexican pride committees from attending the first conference," Tijuana activist Alejandro Garcia said. He said the gathering sent a message of support to gay leaders in Monterrey, where "during the month of January, city and health authorities unleashed a series of illegal detentions against the patrons of five gay discotheques."

EGYPT

Egyptian gays are upset about the forced closing of 13 Turkish baths in Cairo frequented by men seeking sex with men. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism said they are being shut down temporarily because they are in urgent need of repair.

Gays see another motive. "The government knows these are the only places we have to meet, and so they are trying to restrict us further," one activist told Britain's *the Telegraph*.

Two Egyptian men who created a queer Web site have been jailed for committing an indecent act. Sami Gamal, a 27-year-old engineer, and Gameel Gebreel, a 32-year-old accountant, posted nude photos of themselves and offered to have gay sex for pay or for free.

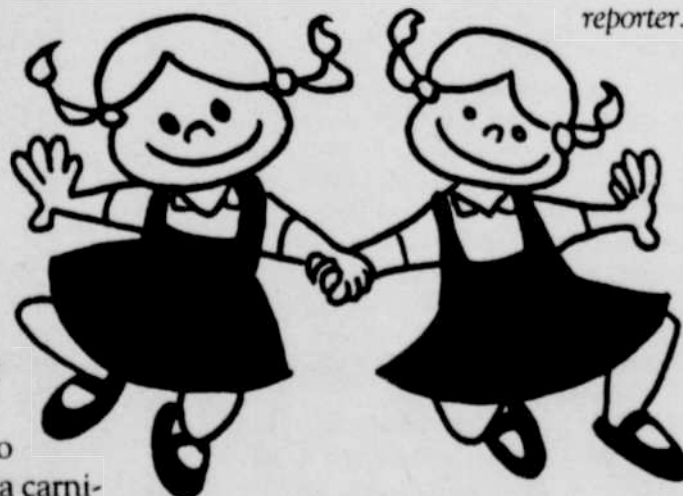
Gamal was jailed for three years, and Gebreel was given a 15-month sentence. The judge said the men had acted disgracefully and defamed Egypt.

SWITZERLAND

Gay and unmarried straight couples in Switzerland's Geneva province will have the same rights as married couples except in matters of immigration, social security, taxes, inheritance and adoption. The Grand Council passed Feb. 15 a partnership law called "the Pact of Civil Solidarity."

According to the legislation's preamble, "Cantons are legally competent to enact anti-discrimination legislation protecting certain arrangements under which people can live together without being married." The measure will take effect in a few months. **JN**

Compiled by REX WOCKNER, who has reported for the gay press since 1985. He has a bachelor's degree in journalism from Drake University and started his career as a radio reporter.



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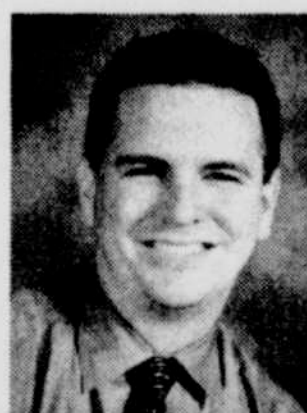
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