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WORLD news



Secretary of State Colin Powell (right) congratulates Michael Guest, the new U.S. ambassador to Romania

ROMANIA
The new U.S. ambassador to Romania is openly gay. That's ironic, activists say, because the nation repeatedly has rejected demands that it repeal all anti-gay laws prior to joining the European Union.

According to the *Washington Post*, Michael Guest will be joined in Bucharest by his partner, Alex Nevarez, who was onstage at the swearing-in ceremony and was verbally acknowledged by Secretary of State Colin Powell. "That small gesture spoke volumes," Human Rights Campaign spokesman David Smith said.

Moscow gay leader Nikita Ivanov agreed. "This is fabulous," he said.

When President Bill Clinton named Jim Hormel as ambassador to Luxembourg in 1997, the Senate blocked him for 21 months. The openly gay man finally was appointed in 1999 without confirmation while the chamber was in recess.

"It is amazing, the contrast of the opposition to Mr. Hormel and the ease with which this gentleman was confirmed," Smith said. "In normal circumstances, this probably would have received a lot more attention. Mr. Guest's confirmation hearing transcript did not contain any mention of his sexual orientation, though he said he was not married. He is a career foreign service officer, has a lengthy career within the State Department and was head of the legislative office, so he likely enjoyed stellar relationships with every Senate office."

Sydney Levy, International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission communications director, said Guest's confirmation "shows progress on the part of the U.S. government. It is ironic that it's Romania. Ambassador appointments have great symbolic importance, but we also need the U.S. government to say loud and clear that human rights for sexual minorities in Romania are important."

Kate Byrnes, State Department Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs spokeswoman, said Sept. 20 that Guest would not be granting any interviews prior to his departure for Romania.

EGYPT
A 15-year-old was jailed for three years Sept. 18 for engaging in gay sex.

Mahmud Abdel Fatah was one of the 53 men arrested in the May 11 swoop on Cairo's Queen

Boat nightclub. He was tried separately because he is a minor.

Prosecutors claimed medical exams proved Fatah engaged in gay sex. He screamed and cried when the verdict was handed down.

The rest of the detainees remain jailed at Tora Prison as their trials continue in an emergency state security court. The rulings cannot be appealed.

The men are charged with practicing sexual immorality and "forming a group which aims to exploit the Islamic religion to propagate extremist ideas." The immorality offense carries a maximum sentence of three years in prison, and the religion offense carries a maximum penalty of five years.

Human rights groups, including Amnesty International, have denounced the arrests. The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission worries about a loss of interest in the men's predicament as attention focuses on the U.S. war on terrorism.

"We are concerned that the United States will forsake human rights consideration as it tries to forge its worldwide [anti-terrorism] coalition," program director Scott Long said. "If this happens, the U.S. government will have not only abandoned the [men] to an unfair and lengthy prison stay, but it will also betray the very values it has sworn to defend."

Communications director Sydney Levy added: "Many news agencies are focusing most of their attention on the dreadful Sept. 11 attack and its aftereffects, leaving little room for anything else. The Egyptian government is using this moment to seal the fate of the [detainees], knowing that its actions will go unchallenged by the world's public opinion."

AFGHANISTAN

Men who have sex with men routinely are punished with death in Afghanistan, the *New York Post* reported Sept. 23.

"Those found guilty of homosexual acts were crushed by having walls toppled over them," according to the U.S. State Department's 1999 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. "In 1998 at least seven such punishments were reported; five persons died after having walls toppled on them."

Afterward, the bulldozer that knocked down the wall runs over them. The *Post* said Taliban leaders considered but rejected two other



Scott Long