

**Bulgaria: Denounce Call to Stone Gays**  
**By: Human Rights Watch**  
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(New York) – The Bulgarian justice minister should publicly denounce a cleric's calls for violence against people who participate in the LGBT Pride Parade in Sofia on June 30, 2012, Human Rights Watch said today in a letter to Justice Minister Diana Kovacheva. In previous years, two Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Pride parades have been marred by violent attacks on participants.

On June 6, Father Evgeni Yanakiev of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was quoted in the Bulgarian Standard newspaper as saying: "Our whole society must in every possible way oppose the gay parade that is being planned. For this reason today I appeal to all those who consider themselves Christians and Bulgarians. Throwing stones at gays is an appropriate way." On June 12 Father Yanakiev confirmed his statement in an interview on Bulgarian national radio.

"The call to stone gay people is a heinous threat to the security of peaceful people who want to use their freedom of assembly," said Boris Dittrich, advocacy director of the LGBT Rights Program at Human Rights Watch. "It is incitement to hatred and violence and should be condemned by the justice minister in the clearest terms and in the most public way possible."

In 2008 right-wing extremist groups and football hooligans violently attacked participants in the first LGBT Pride in Bulgaria. In 2011, unidentified thugs attacked and beat three volunteers from the Sofia Pride Parade. The police have yet to announce any progress in the investigation into these attacks.

In response to calls for The Holy Synod, the highest authority in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, to denounce Father Yanakiev's statements, it issued a statement on June 13. The statement did not address the incitement to hatred and violence, however. Instead it confirmed the church's firm opposition to such "immoral manifestations" as the pride parade. It said that homosexuality is "an unnatural lust that unconditionally harms both the personality of those who commit it and the society as a whole."

"The response of the Holy Synod effectively leaves LGBT people who will participate in the LGBT pride parade in Sofia out in the cold," Dittrich said "This makes it all the more imperative for state authorities to support unequivocally the right of the LGBT community to freely and safely exercise their rights to assembly and expression."

In the letter to Justice Minister Kovacheva, Human Rights Watch wrote that it is the responsibility of the Bulgarian government to protect LGBT people from violence and from hate speech that might lead to violence.

Bulgaria, as a member state of the Council of Europe, is subject to a recommendation (CM/Rec (2010) 5) of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member states to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity. The recommendation was unanimously adopted by the Committee of Ministers on March 31, 2010.

Paragraph six under B Hate Speech reads: "Member States should take appropriate measures to combat all forms of expression, including in the media and on the Internet, which may be reasonably understood as likely to produce the effect of inciting, spreading or promoting hatred or other forms of discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons. Such 'hate speech' should be prohibited and publicly disavowed whenever it occurs."

There is no doubt that Father Yanakiev's call for stoning LGBT people falls under the category of hate speech that Council of Europe member states want to prohibit, Human Rights Watch said.

The Bulgarian Protection Against Discrimination Act prohibits in article 4.1 all direct or indirect discrimination on many grounds, including sexual orientation, which is explicitly mentioned.

Article 21.1 of the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights, to which Bulgaria as an EU member is a party, prohibits any discrimination based on any ground such as sexual orientation.

“Minister Kovacheva should publicly disavow this call for violence and investigate whether Father Yanakiev’s statements can be prosecuted under Bulgaria’s Penal Code,” Dittrich said.

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