

US supports UN declaration decriminalizing homosexuality

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The United States on Wednesday announced its support for a French-sponsored United Nations General Assembly declaration to expand universal recognition of human rights for homosexuals and decriminalize homosexuality worldwide. The US "is pleased to join the other 66 UN member states who have declared their support of this statement that condemns human-rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity wherever they occur," State Department spokesman Robert Wood said.

The move to decriminalize homosexuality was launched in December at the UN, where countries expressed support for the UN Statement on Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

The administration of then-president George W Bush refused to sign the statement, which is not legally binding, though the Bush administration maintained that it was opposed to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Homosexuality is illegal and penalized in 77 countries, and the death penalty is applied in seven countries: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Mauritania, Nigeria, Sudan and Yemen, according to gay-rights activists.

Homosexuality is legal in 47 countries, while 57 other countries have passed legislation to protect same-sex orientation.

The European Union endorsed the French initiative, which called for the universal decriminalization of homosexuality and a campaign to raise awareness of violence and discrimination against lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people.

The US endorsement was celebrated by the gay and lesbian community.

"We applaud the Obama administration for endorsing the UN declaration. People should not be persecuted and targeted as criminals based on their sexual orientation or gender identity," Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said in a statement.

"This is long past overdue, and we are encouraged by the signal it sends that the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people will now be considered human rights."

Mark Bromley of the Council for Global Equality said that by affirming the UN statement, the United States has "joined many of our close allies in calling on all governments around the world to ensure that sexual orientation and gender identity are not subjected to criminal penalty, and that individuals are not executed, arrested or otherwise detained because of their sexual orientation or gender identity."

Once the statement is signed by a large number of countries - there is no official minimum, but 100 countries would be considered a significant threshold - the next step would be to send it to the 192- nation UN General Assembly, where it would have to be adopted in the form of a resolution.