A time to be justifiably proud

Comment
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IN MARCH this year, the United Nations Human Rights Council held the first-ever meeting to discuss discrimination and violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. At that meeting, UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon called on every country in the world to decriminalise same-sex relationships and end discrimination against LGBT people.

This was an important step for the UN in efforts to end discrimination and violence against LGBT people in all its member countries, including Cambodia.

Addressing the council, Ban said: "To those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, let me say: you are not alone.

"Your struggle for an end to violence and discrimination is a shared struggle.

"Any attack on you is an attack on the universal values the United Nations and I have sworn to defend and uphold.

"We must tackle the violence, decriminalise consensual same-sex relationships, end discrimination and educate the public."

The UN family in Cambodia stands 100 per cent behind this statement. We want this message to resonate in the Kingdom, not only this week but throughout the year.

Cambodian law does not criminalise same-sex relationships, and the LGBT pride movement in Cambodia has made great strides in the past few years.

The first gay pride parade was held in 2004, and Cambodian Pride Week began in earnest in 2009, gaining more and more support, attention and interest in the years since.

Community organisations such as Rainbow Community Kampuchea (RoCK) and the National Men who have Sex with Men Network (Bandagn Chaktomuk) continue to grow, adding strength and diversity to Cambodia’s civil-society voices.

Recent studies show that although discrimination and harassment of Cambodian people based on their sexual orientation has diminished, further efforts are required to eliminate discrimination.

Pride week is an opportunity to increase awareness, and intensify dialogue, among Cambodians on these issues.

The marginalisation of groups of people can lead to negative outcomes for a country’s social development. As Cambodia progresses economically, preventing marginalisation and inequality becomes a key imperative.

A society’s value must be measured by the way it values people, regardless of their sexual orientation or social status.

A prosperous society is one that ensures inclusiveness and respects all people.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and infringements of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

Seventy-nine countries, territories and areas still have laws that criminalise same-sex relations between consenting adults.

These laws are serious barriers to an effective AIDS response and are driving lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people underground, where they cannot access life-saving services.

We must also consider the human dimensions of discrimination faced by the LGBT community, as discrimination is perpetuated not only by institutions, but is often tolerated within communities, at workplaces or in homes.

Despite the limited availability of data or research on the situation of LGBT rights protection in Cambodia, there is a need to listen to the voices of those from the LGBT community. As we approach Gay Pride week, it is a key time to listen and learn from the community.

In the realm of public health, discrimination, lack of awareness by health providers and the absence of services that meet the real, diverse needs of people from LGBT communities can prevent them exercising their right to access sexual and reproductive health care.

This increases vulnerability to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections – especially among young gay and transgender people, who often miss out on vital information and services as a result of barriers that silence discussion and restrict decision-making about sexuality and sexual health.

The UN in Cambodia supports the strong, vibrant civil-society groups that promote lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights.

We would like especially to congratulate the efforts of RoCK, an organisation formed following the success of Pride Week 2009. It has been instrumental in ensuring a fantastic line-up of events during the course of this week.

RoCK’s dedicated activists work to improve the lives of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community through improved recognition and respect of their rights in society and through improved livelihoods.

This year, under the theme “Different but the same”, RoCK has organised events and workshops on issues such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights as human rights according to the Yogyakarta Principles, which aim to deliver a future where all people are born equal.

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