

Amnesty International Decries Attack on LGBT Activists in St. Petersburg

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Amnesty International has urged Russia to repeal its "homophobic legislation" that the rights group blames for an outbreak of violence against gay people, and to find those responsible for a recent assault on LGBT activists in St. Petersburg.

Two masked assailants armed with air guns and baseball bats broke into a party hosted by an HIV/AIDS counseling group on Sunday night, shooting participants in their faces and leaving one man blind in one eye.

"This latest insidious attack is sadly characteristic of a widespread atmosphere of homophobia in Russia today," Amnesty International's Europe and Central Asia deputy director, Denis Krivosheyev, said in a statement issued Monday. "If nothing is done to combat the hate, the ground is fertile for further violence."

President Vladimir Putin has recently tried to defuse criticism of Russia's recent law that bans

promoting gay "propaganda" to minors, saying that his government was "doing everything" to make gay participants and viewers comfortable at the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. But "such pledges ring hollow in the face of those ongoing hate crimes," Krivosheyev said.

Amnesty International said in its statement that the law, adopted in July, "institutionalizes discrimination against LGBTI individuals and a wide range of organizations that promote LGBTI rights in Russia" and "has provoked a wave of violence by vigilante groups across the country."

Krivosheyev urged Russia to "repeal this homophobic legislation without delay."

The Russian authorities have opened a criminal case on hooliganism charges in connection with Sunday's attack, Dozhd television station reported. The charge carries a sentence of up to five years in prison.

Anastasia Smirnova, a project manager with a Russian LGBT network, earlier told Russian media that police who showed up at the scene left almost at once, claiming they saw no evidence of a crime.

Amnesty International has urged the Russian authorities to "seek out, investigate and prosecute all those responsible" for the attack and previous violent incidents.

The party on Sunday night was hosted by LaSky, a group that provides free HIV testing and counseling for gay men, to discuss an "anti-hate march" that had gathered some 150 people in downtown St. Petersburg the previous day.

A larger, nationalist rally was attended by between 800 and 1,500 people in St. Petersburg on the country's National Unity Day marked on Nov. 4, Rossiiskaya Gazeta reported.

Police detained about 80 participants for unauthorized gatherings throughout the city, using fireworks and smoke canisters and shouting nationalist slogans.

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