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Uganda: Rights and freedoms under attack with new legislation

President Yoweri Museveni's approval by assent of the Anti-Homosexuality Act confirms the Ugandan government's increasing use of legislation to diminish fundamental rights and freedoms secured under Uganda's Constitution and in regional and international laws, Amnesty International said today.

"Human rights defenders, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people, are the biggest victims of shrinking civil, political and social space in Uganda, with the government using new legislation and draconian measures to silence these groups", said Sarah Jackson, Amnesty International's Deputy Regional Director.

The Anti-Homosexuality Act imposes penalties as high as life imprisonment for people engaging in consensual same-sex sexual activity, and contravenes the rights guaranteed in Uganda's Constitution and in regional and international human rights mechanisms which Uganda is a party to, including the right to privacy, freedom from discrimination and freedom of expression, assembly and association. The Act compels HIV testing in certain circumstances where the person is accused of 'aggravated homosexuality' – an offence which criminalizes same-sex sexual activity among 'serial offenders', people with disabilities and people living with HIV among others. The Act also criminalizes 'promotion of homosexuality', which will have a detrimental impact on healthcare providers and Ugandan and international organizations conducting advocacy on human rights issues.

The signing of the Act by Uganda's President follows a year in which the Ugandan government has repeatedly taken extreme and at times forceful measures against the media and civil society. In May 2013, two newspapers and two radio stations were shut down by the Ugandan police for 10 days whilst it raided the premises, following the publication of a story claiming that the President's son was being groomed by his father to become the next leader. Human rights defenders and journalists who demonstrated twice outside one of the offices of one of the newspapers – *the Monitor* – were subjected to teargas and beatings by Ugandan riot police, and Amnesty International documented the arrest of five civil society activists and two journalists.

In September 2013, the Ugandan Public Order Management Act was signed into law by President Museveni. The Act gives wide discretionary powers to the police to halt or prevent public gatherings. Arrests and use of tear gas by the Ugandan police have been a regular feature of rallies and protests, particularly those organized by opposition groups, in recent years.

"The Ugandan government's antagonistic responses against civil society groups who challenge the status quo is nothing new, but it is now becoming institutionalized through these pieces of draconian legislation," said Sarah Jackson.

"African leaders, the wider international community, and people who stand for equality and justice should condemn the Anti-Homosexuality Act emphasizing the Ugandan government's obligation to protect the human rights of all Ugandans, and stand in solidarity with activists mobilizing against the imposition of discriminatory and exclusionary laws."