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SA Minister of Justice calls on Africa to respect LGBTI people
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Minister Masutha at the opening of the seminar

South Africa's Minister of Justice has called on African nations to accept the human rights of LGBTI people and to change their attitudes towards sexual orientation and gender identity.

On Thursday, delegates from across the continent opened the "Africa Regional Seminar on Finding Practical Solutions for Addressing Violence and Discrimination Against Persons Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression."

The long-anticipated three-day seminar is being hosted in Kempton Park by the South African government and the SA Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) and brings together officials, human rights groups, international and regional bodies, civil society and academics.

Delegates were welcomed by the SAHRC's Chairperson, Advocate Lawrence Mushwana.

Mushwana acknowledged that it had been a "lengthy and protracted process to see this seminar reach fruition." He said that, "addressing the rights of sexual minorities is particularly challenging, and possibly even more so here on the African continent."

Mushwana further noted that, despite "unacceptably high levels of violence that are perpetrated solely due to another person's sexual orientation or gender identity... we are acutely aware that discussions on these matters are either difficult or not tolerated by many leaders, be they politicians, religious leaders, traditional leaders or community leaders."

In his speech, Minister of Justice and Constitutional Development Advocate Michael Masutha said that the seminar had its roots in the resolution adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in May 2014 condemning violence and other human rights violations against the LGBTI community.

The historic resolution, while largely ignored by African governments, also condemned attacks by states against people on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Masutha said that this week's seminar was a building block to towards "bringing AU Member States, in a non-confrontational manner, to a

dialogue on ensuring compliance with the May resolution...”

Addressing the issue of traditional, cultural or religious beliefs, often cited by those against LGBTI equality, the minister quoted former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, who said:

“People are entitled to their opinion. They are free to disapprove of same-sex relationships, for example ... they have an absolute right to believe and follow in their own lives whatever religious teachings they choose. But that is as far as it goes. The balance between tradition and culture on the one hand and universal human rights on the other must be struck in favour of human rights.”

Masutha said that at the heart of efforts to protect LGBTI Africans from “horrendous violations” was the understanding “that we must change societal attitudes”.

He stated: “The most important message we need to send is one of our common humanity. Regardless of the colour of our skin, our gender or sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, we all want the same things – respect, care, compassion and acceptance. We are all human beings.

“It is a message that we must spread all over Africa, We must build communities and a society in which persons are accepted and respected, irrespective of one’s sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, by all including their States.”

The seminar followed a March 2014 commitment by the South African government to host a regional summit on LGBTI equality, as part of a United Nations Human Rights Council process initiated by countries, including South Africa, in 2011.

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