



AFRICA

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Nigerian gay people being hunted down

By Will Ross
BBC News, Bauchi

In northern Nigeria, gay men are being hunted down.

In front of Bauchi state's Sharia Commission, a white-walled two-storey building, men in dark green uniforms are awaiting orders from their boss.

The man in charge of the Islamic police, or Hisbah, says the hunt began when the Hausa Leadership newspaper reported last year that homosexuals in Bauchi had formed an association. The article included a list of names.

The Hisbah tried to track them down, without success. So they looked for help.

"The imams and pastors were alerted, so that they should preach in churches and mosques about this illegal thing," said Jibrin Danlami Hassan, a retired civil servant who now commands the Hisbah, which also enforces bans on the sale of alcohol, prostitution and gambling.

"People should put [an] eye on their children and know those who are moving with them," he said.

"People should try to see where these evil things are taking place, and if they find it please tell the authority.

"We will go and arrest them and make them stop this kind of thing," he said, adding that he was proud to be serving Allah with his work.

Religion, both Christianity and Islam, play a powerful role in shaping people's views on homosexuality in Nigeria.

A deeply conservative country, it has an influential Christian evangelical movement in the south and strong support for Islamic law in the north.

"According to Islam, a generation was wiped out by God because of homosexuality during the Prophethood of Lot, so I am afraid there will be calamity here if homosexuality is practised," said one local resident.

Sting operation

Ishmael, the first man to be caught, was trapped in a sting operation, after striking up a friendship in an online chatroom. He was then forced to reveal names and numbers of close friends - details that were then handed over to the Hisbah.

"They would go to someone's workplace and say 'Do you know Ishmael?' and pick them one by one," says John, who is currently in hiding, fearing arrest.

"They would say, 'Something has happened to Ishmael, we need your help,' and then take him."

As a result of the swoop, nine men are now in Bauchi prison awaiting trial. Officials at the Sharia Commission say they all confessed after being arrested, although this is impossible to verify and the BBC has been told that some of the men were physically assaulted.

"We did not arrest them, it was the community that did it," said Mr Hassan.

"When they were brought here they were safe, they were not tortured. We interviewed them, we interrogated them," he said, blaming "irresponsible people at the ward level" for any violence.

The death sentence has never been carried out under Sharia in Nigeria, but that is what convicted homosexuals face if the state governor also approves it. In reality, such cases are extremely hard to prove, as Islamic law needs four witnesses to testify they saw a homosexual act being performed.

But Salisu Muhammad Bununu from the Sharia Commission is firm.

"Either by stoning, or by pushing them off a high place, or by hanging," he replies, when I ask how the law says convicted homosexuals should be punished.

Mob justice

During a bail hearing for seven of the accused on 22 January, an angry crowd gathered outside the dilapidated Sharia court, demanding swift and severe punishment.

Stones were thrown at the court and the hearing was halted. Police had to shoot in the air to disperse the mob and get the suspects back to prison safely, though there they are also vulnerable.

I met Hassan, a close relative of one of the men on trial.

"I noticed that one of the men wasn't walking properly," he said after a prison visit.

"So I asked him what had happened. He showed me the injury on his leg, where he had been beaten up. I don't know if the prison staff or the inmates did it.

"Our family is so worried about the situation. My relatives keep asking me what's happening, especially married women who may not have the opportunity to witness the court sessions, and so they must rely on information I provide to them.

"They keep asking when he will be released, so I keep asking them to keep praying, and I tell them very soon the case will be settled," he said, adding that he hoped his relative would be bailed.

"But still there is tension in the town, and once people see him, despite the fact he is on bail, they may feel he was set free.

"Maybe extremists will take the law into their own hands. So if we can get his bail we will have to find a safe place for him," he added.

But where to hide? Last month Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan signed into law a bill banning same-sex marriages, gay groups and shows of same-sex public affection, backed by prison terms of up to 14 years - a move which is popular with most Nigerians, both Muslim and Christian.

"I never imagined it would get to this," said John.

"I love my life and I want to live. If, in order to live, it means I have to hide myself, then I'll have to do that. I don't have any option," he said.

Some of the names in this article have been changed for their safety.

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