

## HIV researchers on edge after antigay raids across Africa

A police raid on an established research program in Uganda has left scientists worried that their projects may be targeted by authorities granted sweeping powers under the country's harsh new antihomosexuality law. "We're all sort of wondering who is on a list," says Lisa Butler, a public health researcher at Boston Children's Hospital who has studied HIV prevention and treatment in Uganda for over a decade.

Tensions have been high since 24 February, when Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni signed a law making certain homosexual acts crimes that are punishable by life in prison. In early April, plainclothes police officers reportedly entered the Kampala offices of the Makerere University Walter Reed Project (MUWRP), a program run jointly for more than a decade by the country's largest university and the US Military HIV Research Program. The police arrested one person who was released later that day.

The Ugandan police force later released a statement that they had received a report that the project was "carrying out recruitment and training of young males in unnatural sexual acts." So-called 'crime intelligence officers' infiltrated the project, the release said, and, with other participants, they watched "videos of men engaging in homosexual activity."

An official for the US Department of State told *Nature Medicine* that the police account included "spurious allegations" and that the agency believes the police raided the project "due to its connection with the

US Government." The US joined the World Bank and several European countries in suspending or redirecting tens of millions of dollars in aid after the new homosexuality ban went into effect.

As this issue went to press, MUWRP's operations were suspended to ensure the safety of local staff. Meanwhile, at least two other planned research projects were cancelled because of the law: the first was a survey that was to have been run jointly by Makerere University and the Ugandan office of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, designed to estimate the size of groups at high risk for HIV/AIDS in the country, including men who have sex with men (MSM); the second was a qualitative study funded by the US National Institutes of Health to examine access to HIV prevention and health care services for MSM.

### Wider repercussions

The new law in Uganda may also be sparking more aggressive homophobic actions in other countries across Africa, potentially derailing ongoing HIV prevention efforts. Last month, for example, police in the western Kenya city of Kisumu raided an organization called Men Against AIDS Youth Group, arresting three men after community members complained that the group was "recruiting young school boys into homosexuality and pornography," according to a statement released by a local advocacy group. One activity that raised

concern was a research survey conducted for a national AIDS program that brought many MSMs and sex workers into the organization's office as research participants.

And in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, meanwhile, the Tanzania Sisi Kwa Sisi Foundation, a community organization doing outreach for the CDC-funded Tanzania AIDS Prevention Program, received word in February that the country's Registrar of Non-Governmental Organizations intends to de-register it because of its "promotion of MSM and CSW [sex worker] activities." Researchers in Nigeria similarly worry that antigay laws will threaten local efforts to curb HIV/AIDS among MSM.

Given the antihomosexual climate, David Balikowa, a Kampala-based communications consultant who works with several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), worries that clinical researchers may find it harder to recruit trial participants. "People are going to be very suspicious about NGOs," Balikowa says, because the perception left by the police raid "is that the NGOs are being used as covers for promoting homosexuality."

Concerns about participant confidentiality could also prevent international funding bodies and ethics review boards from approving African studies in high-risk groups. Some researchers worry that confidentiality may be breached during police raids, for example. Others worry about trainee issues. Helen Verdelli, a clinical psychologist at Columbia University in New York, is collaborating with colleagues at Makerere on a study that involves training health workers in Uganda to deliver a specific form of psychotherapy. When she discussed the importance of confidentiality at a recent training session, one Ugandan trainee said that health workers do not have to report individuals who said they were homosexuals, but that person thought they should encourage such persons to turn themselves in to the police to comply with the law. Verdelli says she explained to the trainee that patient confidentiality means "not that you don't have to report, it's that you have to not report the person."

That same sense of needing to comply with the law may also drive suspicions on research teams. "People who are our work colleagues may feel bound to report people with the [research] group, for both homosexual activity and the so-called promotion of it," says Butler.



**Stirring fears:** Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni signs the new antihomosexuality law.

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