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Schulz: Cut aid to African countries with anti-gay laws

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Gay Pride marchers. South Africa, October 2013. [Niko Knigge/Flickr]

Imprisoning gays and lesbians for their sexuality is a “disgrace” that should disqualify offending countries from EU aid, the president of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, told a joint summit with MPs from the Pan-African Parliament yesterday (31 March), sparking a row.

On 25 March, Ethiopia became the third African country, after Uganda and Nigeria, [to institute long-term imprisonments](#) for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people, with other African states, including Kenya, said to be preparing to follow suit.

This represented “an unacceptable violation of the basic rights of individuals” said Schulz, who has been widely tipped to be the next president of the European Commission, after elections in May.

“It is a disgrace that in far too many places, one can be imprisoned for their sexual orientation, and it is even more abhorrent that in some countries people are put to death because of their choice of who to love,” he told an audience of MEPs and African MPs.

This highlighted “the need to redirect aid to civil society and other organizations that fight against

exclusion and discrimination based on sexual preference," he continued. "Appropriate measures should be taken against countries who continue to criminalise homosexuality or pass even more repressive laws. LGBT rights are human rights!"

The issue has become a lightning rod for tensions between the two continents ahead of the 4th EU-African Summit which opens in Brussels on 2 April, after West African leaders [failed to sign off](#) on a flagship free trade deal that would have turbo-boosted EU imports to the continent at the weekend.

The EU has frozen budget payments to Uganda - the bloc gives Uganda €460 million annually - and is holding a series of meetings with Kampala which "will be of great importance in determining how relations develop between the EU and Uganda in the months ahead," officials say. But this is seen as heavy-handed by some Africans.

Several African MPs in Schultz's audience at the European parliament expressed outrage at the EU's professed concern for their human rights, when it had stayed relatively silent about the plight of Western Saharans, living under Moroccan occupation for 40 years. Issues such as migrants' rights, African industrialisation and regional unemployment were also thrown into the mix.

One Ugandan MP queried how the EU would respond if the African Union tried to condition relations on extending practices of polygamy which were "good for Africa" to Europe. "We need to make sure each continent can have its values without necessarily affecting the other," he said.

"Homosexuality, while its part of your culture is in most of our countries - if not all - abominable," said another parliamentarian.

Perhaps the most supportive comment came from an MP who said that he understood the call to peg aid to a fight against sexual discrimination, but "to take this and go into an election campaign talking about homosexuality could compromise my election."

Evangelical fundamentalists

A common theme in contributions from some of the more angry MPs was a perceived incompatibility of homosexuality with Christianity, a religion introduced to Africa by Europeans.

Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands have already moved to freeze aid to Uganda, [after a campaign by US-based evangelical groups](#) persuaded the country to introduce life imprisonments for homosexuality 'offences'.

In Europe too, fundamentalists have been increasingly active in the development arena with a European Citizens Initiative to be heard in Parliament on 10 April proposing a halt to EU aid funding for activities [that involve the destruction of human embryo's](#).

In an indication that the issues are far from black and white, the strongest criticism of Uganda's new homophobic law has come from the Anglican South African priest and anti-apartheid icon, Desmond Tutu, who said that [they recalled Nazi Germany](#) or apartheid-era South Africa.

Faten Aggard-Clerx, the Africa program manager at the European Centre for Development Policy Management, said that many African MPs privately view homophobic movements in Africa as originating from outside the continent, and anyway questioned the EU's moral authority to act on them.

EU hypocrisy?

"In Ethiopia the [anti-gay] law was voted on by parliament in 2004 and implemented in 2005. Ethiopia has now simply said that those convicted cannot be pardoned. But in the last 10 years, we haven't heard the EU criticise Ethiopia on the issue - it even increased its aid - so my question is why now?" she said.

In the same week that the European parliament called for sanctions against the Ugandan president, Yoweri Museveni, the EU's foreign policy wing, the European External Action Service sent an envoy to invite him to visit Europe in person, while Europe's press praised him for his efforts in South Sudan, Aggard-Clerx noted.

"Uganda is seen as an ally of Europe and, for a number of geo-strategic reasons, South Sudan is now an important region that the EU will be focusing on. I don't think the EU will compromise its relationship with Uganda," she told EurActiv.

Nigeria's decision to upend the proposed [EU-Ecowas trade deal](#) at the weekend might have been tied to pique at European frustration over its own anti-gay law, she suggested. "But is the EU really willing to stand by its values despite its interests in some parts of Africa?" she asked.

Summit conclusions

Draft EU-Africa summit conclusions seen by EurActiv contain a commitment to pay particular attention to "the rights of the most vulnerable groups, including people who belong to minorities," marked 'EU proposal' and placed in brackets to indicate a lack of consensus.

But officials say that the issue is not formally on the agenda, even if discussions about Uganda's anti-gay law will take place on the margins of the summit. "Fruitful" meetings with Uganda were held at the weekend, EU sources say, albeit "a number of issues remain under discussion".

"Considerable progress was made and we expect that this positive spirit will be also the one inspiring our discussions on all matters during the summit," Michael Mann, the spokesman for the EU's foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton told EurActiv.

"The EU will reiterate its firm condemnation of the anti-homosexuality law, and of all forms of

discriminatory legislation," he added.

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BACKGROUND

The Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Act was passed by the Parliament of Uganda on 20 December 2013 with the death penalty proposal dropped in favour of life in prison. The law was signed into law by the president of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, on 24 February 2014.

The legislative proposal would broaden the criminalisation of same-sex relations in Uganda domestically, and further includes provisions for Ugandans who engage in same-sex relations outside of Uganda, asserting that they may be extradited for punishment back in Uganda, and includes penalties for individuals, companies, media organisations, or non-governmental organisations that know of gay people or support LGBT rights.

