

From: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/15/world/united-nations-gay-rights-diplomacy.html?_r=0

After Orlando, Gay Rights Moves off Diplomatic Back Burner

By Somini Sengupta



Members of the gay community and other groups in Bangalore, India, held a demonstration Tuesday to condemn the mass shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Fla. Credit: Jagadeesh Nv/European Pressphoto Agency

UNITED NATIONS — For years, diplomats were more comfortable talking about nuclear warheads than sexual orientation.

Sexual orientation was one of those subjects burdened with too many cultural sensitivities. American officials, even if they wanted to advance it on the diplomatic agenda, were wary of offending their allies, not least in the Islamic world.

The [attack on a gay nightclub](#) in Orlando, Fla., moved the needle.

In its aftermath, the United States corralled an unlikely group of countries to support a [United Nations Security Council](#) statement that condemned the attack for “targeting persons as a result of their sexual orientation.” Even Egypt and Russia — not known for embracing their gay and lesbian citizens — signed on, after what diplomats called intense consultations.

Earlier in the day, the United States delivered a pointed rebuke to countries that block gay rights at the [United Nations](#), urging them to “contribute more than condolences and condemnations” after the Orlando attack.

And American embassies in several countries, including India, which still has an anti-sodomy law on the books, draped themselves in the colors of the rainbow flag that signifies gay pride.

The Security Council statement, which was drafted by the United States and issued Monday, carries no legal weight. But it is the first time that the powerful institution, with the capacity to authorize wars, weighed in on sexual orientation.

Homosexuality is still a crime in 73 of the world’s 193 countries, according to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association; in 13, the death penalty can be applied. In some countries, like Egypt, laws against “debauchery” are used to target gays. Russian law [prohibits](#) what it calls “propaganda on nontraditional sexual relationships,” which critics call a thinly veiled measure to harass gay men and lesbians.

“We’re hopefully moving into an era when gross acts of violence are condemned by global leaders rather than when violence motivated by sexual orientation or gender identity” is “dismissed as irrelevant or unworthy,” said Jessica Stern, the executive director of OutRight Action International, an advocacy group.

Still, she said, the United States will be able to sway others only if it can protect its own citizens. “The more we demonstrate respect for Muslim Americans and the more violence we prevent domestically by passing meaningful gun control, the more credible we are likely to be as a global leader,” she said.

Gay rights have [steadily moved up](#) the foreign policy agenda in recent years.

In 2011, the United Nations Human Rights Council for the first time passed a resolution condemning discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. In 2014, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, an outspoken advocate for gay rights, announced that the United Nations [would recognize same-sex unions](#) of employees who are married in a jurisdiction where [same-sex marriage](#) is legal, including New York.

But gay rights still remain a point of contention.

Just last month, many countries, including dozens belonging to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, [blocked](#) the participation of 22 advocacy groups, some representing gay, lesbian and transgender people, from an international meeting devoted to stemming the AIDS epidemic. The United States lobbied to allow them to participate.

Gay rights have been front and center in American diplomacy at least since 2011, when Hillary Clinton, then the secretary of state, declared at the United Nations in Geneva that “gay rights are human rights, and human rights are gay rights.”

In 2015, the State Department appointed Randy W. Berry as its first envoy for the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.

The attack in Orlando on Sunday enabled the United States to elevate the issue on the diplomatic agenda. On Monday morning, as the world was still absorbing the news of the attack, the alternate United States ambassador to the United Nations, David Pressman, told the 193-member General Assembly that condolences were not enough.

“If we are united in our outrage by the killing of so many — and we are — let us be equally united around the basic premise of upholding the universal dignity of all persons regardless of who they love, not just around condemning the terrorists who kill them,” Mr. Pressman said.