

UN welcomes Angola's repeal of anti-gay law, and ban on discrimination based on sexual orientation

In a move to embrace equality, Angola has decriminalized homosexuality and banned discrimination based on sexual orientation, in a sweeping review of its colonial era penal code, which had stood since independence from Portugal in 1975.

Parliamentarians in the southern African nation voted on Wednesday, according to news reports, to remove the so-called "vices against nature" provision, in effect, decriminalizing all same-sex conduct, and established a new penal code which will prohibit discrimination.

Speaking in Geneva on Friday, the Spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)) welcomed the development. Rupert Colville said that the Government has also prohibited discrimination against people based on sexual orientation.

Also welcoming the decision, a UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, said that such legislation "was one of the root causes behind grave and pervasive human rights violations against gay, lesbian, trans and bisexual people".

On his [statement](#), Victor Madrigal-Borloz, urged other States to follow Angola's move, adding that "all other countries that still criminalize homosexuality, must observe these processes of decriminalization as motivation to examine their own legal frameworks, and to bring themselves to full compliance with this human rights imperative".

Of the 193 countries recognized by the United Nations, 68 still criminalize same-sex conduct.

Mr Madrigal-Borloz highlighted that the mere existence of provisions, even when not used to actively prosecute cases, "creates an environment conducive to violence and discrimination".

"In Angola lesbians, gays, and bisexual and trans persons have denounced significant barriers in access to health, employment, education and other essential processes, all due to the perception that their very identities are criminal in nature", he concluded.

Commenting on the ban, the Human Rights Watch NGO, noted that Angola's only gay rights lobbying organization, Iris Angola, was granted legal status last year after four years of operation. The rights group said that they changes marked the latest reform ushered in by the administration of President João Lourenço, a former defense minister who took office in 2017.

The group called the decision an “historic moment” allowing the organization to defend the rights of sexual minorities in Angola. Mozambique, another former Portuguese colony, decriminalized homosexuality in 2015, when it too adopted a new penal code.

[UN envoy welcomes ‘visionary step’ by Greek Parliament on name-change for former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia](#)

The UN Secretary-General’s Personal Envoy dealing with the name dispute between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Matthew Nimetz, [welcomed](#) on Friday the Greek Parliament’s ratification of a name-change deal for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia that ‘opens the door’ to ending a dispute that has lasted some 28 years.

Commending the Greek Parliament and Government on taking “this visionary step”, Mr. [Nimetz](#) said the historic Prespa Agreement between two neighbours “opens the door to a new relationship between them and ushers in a new era for the consolidation of peace and security in the Balkans.”

The dispute stretches back to 1991, when the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia declared its independence from Yugoslavia and announced its intention to be named “Macedonia.” Neighbouring Greece refused to recognize the name, insisting that only the northern Greek region of the same name should be called Macedonia, and arguing that the former Yugoslav Republic’s use of the name was a challenge to Greek sovereignty.

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Parliament and the country’s citizens approved the change – renaming the country the Republic of North Macedonia – in a referendum held in September 2018, shortly after the leaders of the former Republic of Macedonia and Greece signed a deal on the issue in a ceremony at Lake Prespa, where the borders of the two countries (and Albania) meet.

In today’s statement, Mr. Nimitz looked forward look forward to completion of the process as outlined in the Agreement and reiterated the “continued commitment of the United Nations to working with the two Parties.”

Venezuela: At least 20 dead, situation could 'rapidly spiral out of control' warns UN rights chief

[UN human rights](#) chief Michelle Bachelet warned on Friday that the situation in Venezuela could “rapidly spiral out of control”, amid ongoing deadly violence and uncertainty linked to Wednesday’s declaration by Juan Guaidó that he had become the country’s interim president.

At the same time, the UN refugee agency ([UNCHR](#)) warned of “mounting tension” in the troubled country as some 5,000 people a day continue to leave, a “significant number” of them in “dire” need of protection.

Speaking to journalists in Geneva on behalf of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Spokesperson Rupert Colville said: “We have received information from credible local sources that at least 20 people have died after allegedly being shot by security forces or by members of pro-government groups during demonstrations on Tuesday and Wednesday with many other reported injured by bullets, buckshot and rubber bullets.”

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He added: “The High Commissioner is extremely concerned, and I quote, ‘that the situation in Venezuela may rapidly spiral out of control with catastrophic consequences.’”

In her statement, Ms Bachelet insisted that it was vital to prevent a repetition of repression against protesters of the Government of President Nicolás Maduro, who was officially sworn back into office, just two weeks ago.

Grave rights abuses documented by OHCHR in 2017 included extrajudicial killings, widespread arbitrary detentions, restrictions to freedom of assembly and expression and indiscriminate house raids and attacks.

Mr Colville noted the High Commissioner’s appeal to the Venezuelan authorities to exercise restraint, especially the security forces.

They should also respect everyone’s fundamental right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression, he continued, adding that the UN rights chief wished to remind them that the “excessive, disproportionate or indiscriminate use of force is clearly and unequivocally prohibited under international law”.

Echoing comments by [UN chief António Guterres](#) on Thursday that everything must be done to avoid the kind of conflict “that would be a total disaster for Venezuela, for the Venezuelan people and for the region”, Ms. Bachelet urged the country’s political leaders to begin “immediate” talks to defuse the situation and find a practical long-term solution to the country’s entrenched social, political and economic crisis.

“She says it’s vital the authorities refrain from closing any remaining avenue of dialogue by prosecuting political and social leaders including members of the National Assembly,” Mr Colville said, in reference to the opposition-controlled chamber, which is led by Juan Guaidó, whose declaration assuming the interim-presidency has also sparked a diplomatic crisis, with some countries in the region, including the US, backing him, while others, including Russia and Cuba, have defended President Maduro.

Exodus of 5,000 each day continues: UNHCR

At the Venezuelan border, meanwhile, UNHCR said that thousands of people continue to leave the country, amid the ongoing economic and security crisis. More than three million have done so in recent years.

“The population movement so far has remained constant since last year, and that is some 5,000 Venezuelans leaving their country every day on average,” Spokesperson Liz Throssell said.

She confirmed that UNHCR staff were also monitoring the situation at “key” border areas. “We are providing assistance to those in need, those who may be crossing the borders,” Ms Throssell explained. “With the mounting tension that we have seen between Venezuela and its neighbours, UNHCR has reinforced its presence along these borders; we are monitoring populations movement and we have been also preparing for any potential change in the number of refugees and migrants leaving Venezuela.”

Commenting on the situation of those travelling outside Venezuela to neighbouring countries, the UNHCR spokesperson noted that “we have seen a significant number in dire need of international refugee protection and humanitarian assistance.

[‘Stigma plays a big role’ in failure to tackle world opioid crisis, advocate tells UN](#)

The recognition of drug addiction as a disease was the focus of a panel discussion at United Nations Headquarters on Thursday. “Leaving No One Behind: the Opioid Epidemic as a Global Challenge”, was organized by the UN

Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)), to highlight the growing problem of addiction worldwide.

“Treating addiction as something criminal is contributing to this global crisis”, said Nora Volkow, Director of the US National Institute on Drug Abuse. Ms Volkow called on the importance of acknowledging the drug problem “from the perspective of the health system”.

“When we understand that people are ill, stigma goes away, and we know what to do, we treat them with compassion and we get them the best treatment we can”, added David Sheff, best-selling author and advocate, who has become an expert on the international opioid crisis, which has become a major public health emergency in the United States.

According to the latest [World Drug Report](#) launched by the UN agency in 2018, the non-medical use of prescription drugs is becoming a major threat to public health and law enforcement worldwide, with opioids causing the most harm and accounting for 76 per cent of deaths associated with drug-misuse.

Highlighting the importance of understanding “brain chemistry” and the role of education in prevention, Mr Sheff added that “much of the drug usage decision comes from stress”, which can result from many factors including family discord, stress at school, or violence, but also simply the day-to-day stress of growing up.

Looking at vulnerable age groups, the UNODC report found that drug use is highest among young people, with research suggesting that 12- to 17-year-olds are at particular risk.

“This idea that some kids have now in some communities that if they haven’t filled out their college resumes by the time they’re 12, they are going to fail in life, it’s a lot of stress on kids”, added Mr Sheff.

His memoir “Beautiful Boy: A Father’s Journey Through His Son’s Addiction”, where he shares the heartbreaking experience of survival, relapse and recovery of his son Nic, was recently turned into a film, screened on Wednesday at UN Headquarters.

Mr Sheff said that the idea that one has to practice ‘tough love’ to help someone dealing with a drug dependence is one “that is dangerous, because the consequences can be dire, including death. We shall intervene as soon as we can” he appealed, stressing that a whole range of treatment that is now available, it wasn’t 10 or 15 years ago.

Adding her personal experience to the discussion was Vicky Cornell, co-founder of the Chris and Vicky Cornell Foundation and wife of late rock icon Chris Cornell. Since her husband’s death in May 2017, Ms Cornell had become an expert and advocate on the whole issue of drug abuse, highlighting the importance of ending misconceptions about what is “a totally preventable and treatable disease”.

And we’ll have more on this story in our Lid Is On podcast next week, where

we'll be talking to David Sheff and Vicky Cornell about their work and what the UN can do, to help with the fight against drug addiction.

Environment and health at increasing risk from growing weight of 'e-waste'

To highlight the rising challenge posed by mountains of discarded electronics worldwide, seven UN entities came together to launch the report at the [World Economic Forum](#) in Davos, Switzerland, on Thursday, in a bid to offer some solutions to a behemoth-sized problem that is making the world sicker and adding to environmental degradation.

The joint report, entitled, "A New Circular Vision for Electronics – Time for a Global Reboot", calls for a new vision for e-waste based on the "circular economy" concept, whereby a regenerative system can minimize waste and energy leakage.

"E-waste is a growing [global challenge](#) that poses a serious threat to the environment and human health worldwide", said Stephan Sicars, Director of the Department of Environment at the UN Industrial Development Organization. "To minimize this threat, UNIDO works with various UN agencies and other partners on a range of e-waste projects, all of which are underpinned by a circular economy approach".

According to the report, a deliberative process must be instilled to change the system – one that collaborates with major brands, small and medium-sized enterprises, academia, trade unions and civil society.

Walking the talk

Considerable work is already under way to harness a circular economy. For example, the Nigerian Government, the Global Environment Facility and UN Environment announced a \$2 million investment to formalize an e-waste recycling industry in Nigeria. The new investment will leverage over \$13 million in additional financing from the private sector.

"Thousands of tonnes of e-waste is disposed of by the world's poorest workers in the worst of conditions, putting their health and lives at risk", maintained Guy Ryder, Director-General, [International Labour Organization](#) (ILO). "We need better e-waste strategies and green standards as well as closer collaboration between governments, employers and unions to make the circular economy work for both people and planet."

Despite growing e-waste, “A New Circular Vision” points to the importance of technologies from the so-called Internet of Things – a network of devices that contain electronics and the connectivity that allows them to exchange data – through to cloud computing advances, which can all result in smarter recycling and tracking of e-waste.

“A circular economy brings with it tremendous environmental and economic benefits for us all” said Joyce Msuya, Acting Executive Director, UN Environment Programme (UN Environment). “Our planet’s survival will depend on how well we retain the value of products within the system by extending their life.”

The report supports the work of the E-waste Coalition, which includes International Labour Organization ([ILO](#)); International Telecommunication Union ([ITU](#)); United Nations Environment Programme ([UN Environment](#)); United Nations Industrial Development Organization ([UNIDO](#)); United Nations Institute for Training and Research ([UNITAR](#)); United Nations University ([UNU](#)) and Secretariats of the Basel and Stockholm Conventions.