

# Cuban Government Backs Calls to Combat Homophobia

by Andrea Rodriguez

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HAVANA - Cuba's gay community celebrated unprecedented openness - and high-ranking political alliances - with a government-backed campaign against homophobia on Saturday.

The meeting at a convention center in Havana's Vedado district may have been the largest gathering of openly gay activists ever on the communist-run island. President Raul Castro's daughter Mariela, who has promoted the rights of sexual minorities, presided. "This is a very important moment for us, the men and women of Cuba, because for the first time we can gather in this way and speak profoundly and with scientific basis about these topics," said Castro, director of Cuba's Center for Sexual Education.



Mariela Castro, center, daughter of Cuba's President Raul Castro, and two unidentified participants attend a ceremony marking the International Day Against Homophobia in Havana, Saturday, May 17, 2008. (AP Photo/Javier Galeano)

Mariela Castro joined government leaders and hundreds of activists at the one-day conference for the International Day Against Homophobia that featured shows, lectures, panel discussions and book presentations. A station also offered blood-tests for sexually transmitted diseases.

Cuban state television gave prime-time play Friday to the U.S. film "Brokeback Mountain," which tells the story of two cowboys who conceal their homosexual affair.

Prejudice against homosexuals remains deeply rooted in Cuban society, but the government has steadily moved away from the Puritanism of the 1960s and 1970s, when homosexuals hid their sexuality for fear of being ridiculed, fired from work or even imprisoned.

Now Cuba's parliament is studying proposals to legalize same-sex unions and give gay couples the benefits that people in traditional marriages enjoy.

Parliament head Ricardo Alarcon said the government needs to do more to promote gay rights, but said many Cubans still need to be convinced.

Things "are advancing, but must continue advancing, and I think we should do that in a coherent, appropriate and precise way because these are topics that have been taboo and continue to be for many," Alarcon told reporters.

Some at the conference spoke of streaming out into the streets for a spontaneous gay-pride parade, but others urged caution.

The gay rights movement should be careful not to “flood” Cuban society with a message that many are not ready to hear, physician and gay activist Alberto Roque cautioned.

And Mariela Castro said gay activists should opt for more subtle ways to chip away at deep-seated homophobic attitudes.

Defending equal rights for Cubans, of all sexual orientations, is a key principal of the Cuban revolution led by her uncle Fidel Castro, who overthrew dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959, she said.

“The freedom of sexual choice and gender identity (are) exercises in equality and social justice,” she said.