

## Gays & Lesbians: The Closet Door Swings Open

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# GAYS & LESBIANS

## The Closet Door Swings Open

BY JAMES GREEN AND ENRIQUE ASIS



**800 demonstrators from SOMOS, an early Brazilian gay-rights group, protest police raids in São Paulo in 1980. The gay movement in Brazil has been divided about whether to actively support other progressive struggles.**

When Dr. Francisco Estrada Valle, a co-founder of AVES, one of Mexico's first AIDS-education programs, failed to show up last July 12 at a school seminar on AIDS prevention he was scheduled to lead, his friends became worried and reported him missing to the police. Early the next morning Estrada's body was found in an apartment in southern Mexico City with the bodies of two other gay men—Rene de la Torre González, a physician, and Javier Rivero Meléndez, a school-teacher. The three had been gagged, stabbed and strangled. That same week three other gay men were murdered in similar circumstances around Mexico City. The police and government offi-

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cialists declared the deaths crimes of passion. AIDS and gay-rights organizations, however, insist that the murders are part of a generalized wave of gay bashing and violence against Mexican homosexuals. The police have so far not arrested any suspects.

No overall estimates have been made of the level of anti-gay violence throughout Latin America largely because lesbian and gay groups from different countries have only recently begun to exchange information and coordinate activities. To give a sense of the extent of the problem, Grupo Gay da Bahia (GGB), a Brazilian gay organization, has documented the murders of 1,200 gays and lesbians in Brazil over the last decade, often by gay hustlers who are let off or given light prison sentences. In Colombia over 328 anti-gay killings have been reported between 1986 and 1990, though, according to the Bogotá-based human-rights group Intercongregational Commission for Justice and Peace, most crimes against homosexuals go unreported.

Gays and lesbians in Ecuador and Peru have also been victims of violent attacks. On December 4, 1991, eight homosexuals were killed on the streets of Barrio La Hariscal, a residential and commercial sector of Quito. The local press noted that the police knew in advance of at least one group of residents who had threatened to "clean up" the tourist sector by ridding it of homosexuals and prostitutes in this manner. Similar stories have surfaced in Lima, where there is an active gay night life.

The killers are typically "social-clean up" death squads which operate in most major cities in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. According to Colombian gay activist Ricardo Contreras, these groups are comprised of young men from wealthy families as well as police officers. They are generally backed by independent groups of right-wing extremists. Many victims are young male prostitutes and transvestites, forced by hopelessness and poverty to rent their bodies on the streets. The death squads justify their actions by charging that these homosexuals are carriers of the AIDS virus and that their street activities drive tourists away. The Catholic Church's official policy condemning homosexuality gives an additional veneer of legitimacy to their crimes.

Violence is the most extreme form of homophobia in Latin America; more pervasive are conservative family-values campaigns which target homosexuals. Because the Napoleonic Code which eliminated sanctions against homosexuality was adopted as the legal system in most Latin American countries during the period of independence, until recently only Ecuador and Chile had laws on the book that punished homosexual activities between consenting adults. Government-sanctioned anti-gay campaigns, therefore, were based on the violation of "moral propriety" or vagrancy.

In the 1970s when gay and lesbian liberation movements emerged in the United States and Europe, many countries in Latin America were suffering under military dictatorships. The military used appeals to Christian morality, the family and patriotism to legitimize their rule. The Catholic Church hierarchy tended to support these regimes and promoted a moral value system that

included the condemnation of homosexuality. While the return to electoral democracy in many Latin American countries has somewhat neutralized this right-wing traditional family ideology, President Violeta Chamorro is heading a new conservative campaign in Nicaragua which has made homosexuals one of its targets.

Last July, Chamorro signed into law the country's new penal code which includes Article 204 (formerly Article 205) mandating sentences of one to three years for anyone who "induces, promotes, propagandizes or practices in a scandalous manner the cohabitation of individuals of the same sex." The Sandinista bloc in the national assembly voted against this constitutional reform. Gay and lesbian activists immediately challenged the constitutionality of the article in an appeal presented before the Nicaraguan Supreme Court on November 9. Hazel Fortseca of *Colectivo Nosotras*, the country's main lesbian organization, fears that in addition to criminalizing gay and lesbian activities, the new law will cripple AIDS-education efforts because campaigns that encourage safe sex will likely be construed as promoting homosexuality.

### Dawn of the Movement

On June 28, 1969, New York police carried out a routine raid on the Stonewall Inn, a gay men's bar in Greenwich Village, New York. Street people, transvestites, lesbians and gay men, however, fought back against the police action in what is now known as the Stonewall Rebellion. The day is commemorated by parades and demonstrations throughout the world the last weekend in June. The Stonewall Rebellion sparked the formation of hundreds of gay-liberation groups throughout the country.

At the same time that a movement was developing in the United States and Europe, homosexuals in different parts of Latin America were beginning to come together to fight homophobia. In the early 1970s, groups were formed in Mexico, Argentina and Puerto Rico, three industrialized countries that had large middle classes and were not under military dictatorships. Like the early gay-liberation movement in the United

States, these organizations considered the fight against the oppression of homosexuals to be inextricably linked to the struggles of other social movements. In particular, they emphasized the connection between feminism and the gay movement, and the need to encourage a generalized sexual liberation of society. However, unlike the movement in the United States, the gay and lesbian movement in Latin America had no long tradition of homophile organizing to look back to.

Probably the first homosexual-rights organization in Latin America was *Nuestro Mundo* (Our World), founded on November 1, 1969 in Buenos Aires by an ex-militant of the Communist Party expelled for being homosexual. In August, 1971, *Nuestro Mundo* joined with a group of gay intellectuals to form the Argentine Homosexual Liberation Front (FLH). The new organization published eight issues of a bulletin, *SOMOS*, between December, 1973 and January, 1976. Besides attempting to organize the gay community, it also participated in leftist demonstrations, including a major rally against the military take-over in Chile in September, 1973. It dissolved in mid-1976 in the immediate aftermath of the March 1976 coup d'etat which brought to power a military dictatorship. The generals arrested and killed thousands including gays and lesbians and wiped out the incipient homosexual-rights movement.

Two years later, in Brazil, in the midst of a democratic opening provoked by a severe economic crisis and the mobilization of students, intellectuals and workers against the military dictatorship, gays organized that country's first homosexual-rights movement. A group of writers and intellectuals began publishing *Lampião*, a monthly newspaper sold at newsstands throughout Brazil, which declared its intention to speak for the unrepresented "minorities"—women, blacks, homosexuals and Indians. Soon thereafter, the Group of Homosexual Affirmation (SOMOS) was founded in São Paulo. SOMOS attempted to build links with other movements by joining the Unified Black Movement in protest demonstrations and supporting the emerging feminist movement.

SOMOS and *Lampião* inspired the formation of over a dozen other groups throughout Brazil, many of which met in April, 1980 at the First National Congress of Homosexual Groups. While the purpose of the meeting was to exchange experiences and develop greater cooperation among the new gay and lesbian organizations, the Congress ended up polarizing over a resolution to participate in the upcoming May Day demonstration being held in the midst of a massive metalworkers' strike in the Greater São Paulo area. A sector of the movement, led by the leftists within SOMOS, wished to join in solidarity

### FOR MORE INFO...

For more information about the lesbian and gay movement in Latin America contact:

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The Latino/a Network is a network of groups and individuals working in solidarity with gays, lesbians and people with HIV/AIDS in Latin America.

**Lesbian/Gay/Bi Caucus of LASA**  
c/o James N. Green  
1031 N. Ogden Drive #8

West Hollywood, CA 90046  
(213) 654-5576

The Lesbian/Gay/Bi Caucus of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) was founded by 40 lesbian and gay attendees at the XVII LASA Congress held in September, 1992 in Los Angeles. Its purpose is to encourage more research and scholarly exchange about issues of gays, lesbians, homosexuality and sexuality in Latin America.

**KA-BUUM**  
120 Sanford, Second Floor  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901  
(908) 247-6850

KA-BUUM is a Spanish-language bulletin that publishes information about the gay and lesbian movement in Latin America. **JG & EA§**

with the labor struggle. Others argued that the gay and lesbian organizations were too weak to join other mobilizations and needed to maintain their autonomy. Over 50 gays and lesbians ended up joining the May Day march, and rallied with banners opposing discrimination against homosexual work-

ers and in support of striking metalworkers. They were warmly received by the striking workers. A month later, the gay-rights movement in São Paulo, again led by the left wing, organized a protest march of 800 homosexuals and others against police sweeps in downtown São Paulo.

Gay-rights organizations retreated in the face of deep divisions between those who wished to link up with the Workers Party (PT) and other social movements, and those who preferred to remain autonomous and dedicate themselves to internal consciousness-raising. By 1983 much of the movement

## ON THE BRINK OF AN AIDS CRISIS



**A gay man with AIDS in a Rio de Janeiro shantytown. Health-care cuts and homophobic attitudes are contributing to the rapid spread of AIDS.**

Support the Prevention of AIDS (GAPA), estimates that three million people are HIV-positive.

While figures on the distribution of AIDS cases by category are somewhat questionable due to the fact that many men decline to admit homosexual contacts, the Pan-American Health Organization calculates that in 1991 homosexuals and bisexuals comprised 67% of the AIDS cases in the Andean region, 56% in the Southern Cone, 25% in Central America, and 13% in the Caribbean.

In countries such as Argentina which traditionally have had a good public health-care system, the severe debt crisis of the 1980s resulted in dramatic cuts in social services and a move toward the privatization of health care. This means that people with HIV/AIDS cannot rely on the government for much assistance. Javier L. Hourcade Bellocq, the projects director of CONSIDA, one of Argentina's most effective AIDS organizations, says that the Argentine government refuses to take the issue seriously. "When the American AIDS Foundation announced in Amsterdam last year that it was giving six Argentine AIDS groups a total grant of \$300,000 for AIDS prevention and care, the Minister of Health refuted the claim that Argentina was on the brink of a severe crisis," he said. "There are only two health centers for AIDS treatment in the entire country and the conditions there are precarious to say the least."

The homophobic attitudes of government officials and the Catholic Church are a barrier to adequate AIDS education. In Argentina, for example, the Church has pressured the government to eliminate any reference to homosexuality, condoms or sexuality from the official AIDS-prevention campaign, essentially eviscerating it. In Nicaragua, the new sodomy law signed by President Chamorro will likely inhibit any reference to homosexuality in that country's AIDS education. **JG & EA§**

When Juan Ortega (a pseudonym) went to his doctor three years ago for an HIV test, he was sure that he would not have the virus. He had been in a three-year relationship. He and his boyfriend had just finished paying off the furniture for their small one-bedroom apartment near Avenida Santa Fe, a gay cruising area in Buenos Aires. Although he did not practice safe sex, he thought AIDS was only a danger for those who went to Brazil for Carnival or who had slept with a visiting tourist. The doctor told him he was HIV-positive.

While AIDS is not as common in Latin America as in Africa or the United States, activists are concerned that grossly inadequate government funding for AIDS education, research and health care is creating a near-crisis in many countries in the region. The Pan American Health Organization's December report, "AIDS Surveillance in the Americas," says a cumulative total of 59,723 AIDS cases have been re-

ported in Latin America, and 24,500 people have died of the illness. (This compares to 249,234 AIDS cases and 164,884 deaths in the United States.) The countries in Latin America with the greatest number of reported AIDS cases are: Brazil (31,364), Mexico (11,034), Haiti (3,086), Argentina (2,745), Venezuela (2,173), Honduras (1,976), and the Dominican Republic (1,809). The per capita AIDS rate in the United States, including Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, is 167.5 per million inhabitants. The per capita rate in a number of Latin America countries is higher than or comparable to the U.S. rate: the Bahamas (903.8 AIDS cases per million inhabitants), Bermuda (396.6), Honduras (91.5), Belize (60.4), and Brazil (53.3).

While it is impossible to make accurate estimates about the incidence of HIV in the population, in Brazil, Nelson Solano Vianna, a long-time activist with the São Paulo organization Group to

had dissipated, exhausted from internal fighting, lacking a clear vision and facing difficult economic conditions.

### A New Resurgence?

In the United States, the devastating effects of AIDS on the gay men's community combined with right-wing fundamentalist anti-homosexual campaigns injected new vitality in the lesbian and gay movement in the 1980s. In Latin America, many new lesbian and gay organizations formed in the last decade to confront AIDS, and fight homophobia and anti-gay violence.

Just as the demise of the dictatorship in Brazil provided the space for a homosexual-rights movement to coalesce in 1978, so too the end of military rule in Argentina and Uruguay in 1983 and a return to electoral democracy in Chile in 1989 created an environment conducive to organizing. Over the last five years, gay and lesbian organizations have worked in at least four main areas: to denounce and combat gay bashing and homophobic violence; to gain legal recognition of their organizations; to provide support to AIDS groups; and to combat homophobic attitudes in Latin American society.

Human-rights and gay and lesbian organizations have responded to anti-gay violence with protest demonstrations and denunciations. Brazil and Mexico have perhaps the strongest groups working for this cause. In Colombia, by contrast, the systematic nature of the death squads has frightened and discouraged gay and lesbian activists from establishing permanent organizations.

The murder of Dr. Francisco Estrada Valle was met with protests in Mexico City as well as an international campaign to protest the Mexican government's laxity in investigating the murders.

In Brazil, Grupo Gay da Bahia, under the leadership of anthropology professor Luis Mott, has carried out a national campaign against violence although the organization remains somewhat isolated in Salvador, in the northeastern part of the country. The group has created a mobile gay holocaust memorial, consisting of a string of small banners with the name and the cause of death of lesbians and gays who have



**A gay-pride parade in Mexico City. Gay organizations in Mexico and Brazil have mounted the region's strongest campaigns against anti-gay violence.**

been murdered. It takes this display to demonstrations and protests. The Central Unica dos Trabalhadores (CUT), Brazil's largest labor federation, and the Workers Party have supported this campaign by publishing a poster which lists the names of murder victims. Printed over the names in bold red type is the statement: "Causa Mortis: Prejudice—Each Week a Homosexual is Assassinated in Brazil—How Many More Victims of Prejudice and Discrimination Must We Have? To Report Anti-gay Violence, Contact...etc."

The best-known case of the fight for legal recognition was waged by the group Argentine Homosexual Community (CHA). Founded in 1983 after the demise of the military dictatorship, CHA presented three separate petitions to the government for legal recognition, all of which were denied by the Justice Ministry. Gay and lesbian activists in the United States and Europe in coordination with CHA then organized a campaign to challenge President Carlos Menem while he was on tour in the United States and Europe last year. As a result of the demonstrations and press coverage, the Argentine government was forced last year to grant the group legal status.

Gay and lesbian organizations are also starting to coordinate their work on an international scale. Last year the Gathering of Lesbian Latinas in Puerto

Rico brought together 158 women, half of whom were Latinas residing in United States and the other half were from Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica. The women met to share experiences and encourage future common activities. Last November, representatives from 19 South American lesbian and gay groups gathered in Santiago, Chile to discuss their experiences. These international meetings help the different gay and lesbian organizations to overcome the isolation that they encounter doing work in their own countries.

It has been almost 24 years since the first homosexual organization in Latin America was founded in a working-class suburb of Buenos Aires. The coming to power of military governments in Peru, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay and Argentina, and Latin America's profound economic crisis held back the development of the movement. Yet today, activists throughout Latin America are again optimistic as new groups emerge to fight homophobia, anti-gay violence, and government indifference to the AIDS crisis. While anti-homosexual attitudes, fueled by the Catholic Church, still predominate, there is a sense that things have changed and that nothing will ever be quite the same for gays and lesbians throughout the Americas. The closet door is crashing down everywhere. §