Muslim nations block gay groups from UN AIDS conference

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United Nations: Major Western nations are protesting a move to block gay and transgender groups from attending a high-level United Nations conference on AIDS.

A letter from Egypt on behalf of 51 countries in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation asked that 11 organizations not be allowed to attend the conference next month. The letter, dated April 26 and obtained on Wednesday by The Associated Press, gives no reason for the objections.

The non-governmental organizations the 57-member OIC requested to be banned were from Egypt, Estonia, Guyana, Jamaica, Kenya, Peru, Thailand, Ukraine, Africa and the United States. All focus on gay, lesbian or transgender rights.

In a letter to General Assembly President Mogens Lykketoft, US Ambassador Samantha Power said the groups that were singled out appeared to have been chosen for their involvement with gay and transgender issues and asked that all groups that have requested participation be allowed to attend.

â€œGiven that transgender people are 49 times more likely to be living with HIV than the general population, their exclusion from the high level meeting will only impede global progress in combatting the HIV/AIDS pandemic and achieving the goal of an AIDS-free generation,â€• the letter, dated May 13, stated.

According to the OIC letter to Lykketoft, the US group now banned from the conference is Global Action for Trans Equality.

Â Â Â **The European Union letter, signed by Ambassador Joao Vale de Almeida, expressed concern that the groups had been struck from the initial list of participants at the conference and asked for information about which countries objected and why.**

â€œIf youâ€™re serious about getting to zero (AIDS cases), then itâ€™s vital to include all communities,â€• Britainâ€™s deputy UN ambassador Peter Wilson said. â€œItâ€™s wrong to block access to the UN for transgender organizations and gay organizations that have every right to participate in this important discussion.â€•

Canadaâ€™s Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative Michael Grant said his country also sent a letter expressing concern that members could remove civil society groups from a conference without providing any justification.

â€œItâ€™s quite concerning, especially on an issue like HIV/AIDS,â€• Grant said. Australiaâ€™s UN ambassador also wrote a letter of protest.

When Lykketoft negotiated arrangements late last year for the AIDS conference, to be held at UN headquarters on June 8-9, some members insisted on being able to object to an NGOâ€™s participation without any public explanation.

- AP