

Colombians stage kiss-a-thon in support of LGBT rights

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Men set off flares during a "Kiss-a-thon" held as a form of protest for LGBT rights in Bogota, Colombia. (AP)

Bogota (Colombia): Dozens of same sex couples kissed simultaneously outside an upscale shopping mall in Colombia's capital Wednesday, in the latest demonstration calling for LGBT rights in the South American country.

The "kiss-a-thon" was held just days after two gay men in their early 20s were harassed at the Andino shopping center by a man who pushed the couple, screamed profanities at them and accused them of fondling each other in front of a group of children.

Esteban Miranda and Nicolas Tellez denied doing that, saying they were only hugging and holding hands just like many heterosexual couples strolling the mall's flashy corridors. They quickly called the police to seek protection from the enraged man but were instead fined for indecent exposure.

The incident was caught on video by bystanders and shared widely on social media, sparking a wave of support for the young gay couple.

On Wednesday night, hundreds of activists waving rainbow flags gathered around one of the mall's entrances and screamed chants in support of gay rights.

Paola Gutierrez, 21, hugged her girlfriend and gave her a heartfelt kiss on the lips, after a protest organizer with a megaphone urged participants to express their "freedom" to love.

Esteban Carrillo, 24, second from right, holds hands with Nicolas Tellez, 19, during a "kiss-a-thon," a form of protest for LGBT rights in Bogota, Colombia. (Photo: AP)

"Kissing someone is no crime," said Gutierrez, who wore a pair of rainbow colored suspenders. "All we want is for there to be less divisions in this society, and no discrimination against people over their sexual preferences."

Colombia is one of South America's more liberal countries when it comes to LGBT legislation. Same-sex couples in the Andean nation can form civil unions and adopt children, something they are not allowed to do in neighboring countries like Venezuela and Peru.

But experts say homosexuality is still perceived negatively by much of Colombia's population, leading to frequent cases of discrimination.

Gutierrez said that she and her girlfriend get cat-called by men when they hold hands in the street.

Another protester, Nicolas Lara, said he was once sent to a psychiatrist at a public hospital after he told a doctor there that he had relationships with other men.

“There’s no place for these incidents in the 21st century,” Lara said. “We need to work toward a more tolerant society.”

- AP