

Embassy Protest Assails Nicaraguan Sodomy Bill

Demonstrators Urge Veto to Protect Gay Rights

By Ricardo Castillo
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About 40 human rights activists and gay rights supporters gathered in front of the Nicaraguan Embassy in Dupont Circle yesterday to protest a proposed change in that country's penal code that would punish homosexuals for engaging in "scandalous" behavior.

"We are here to remind Nicaraguan President Violeta Chamorro that the world is watching and that gay rights are human rights," said Cary Allan Johnson, regional director of Amnesty International, which organized the protest. The demonstrators called on Chamorro to prevent the change from becoming law.

On June 11, the Nicaraguan National Assembly approved an amendment to the country's sodomy law under which "anyone who induces, promotes, propagandizes or practices sex among persons of the same sex in a scandalous manner . . . will face one to three years of imprisonment."

Gay and human rights activists in Nicaragua and elsewhere say that the bill is a blatant violation of human rights and that its language is too vague and too open to interpretation.

Enrique Asis of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission in San Francisco, which lobbied against the bill, called it "one of the most repressive sodomy laws and one of the most ex-

PLICIT attacks on gay rights in the hemisphere." Asis said that only Ecuador and Chile now have such laws.

The Nicaraguan government yesterday denied, through the embassy in Washington, that the bill hampers human rights. "The article does not inhibit free expression or sexual freedom. The standards of other countries cannot be forced upon Nicaragua where the vast majority of its citizens disagree with open homosexual lifestyles," the communique said.

Officials at the Nicaraguan Embassy said that the bill had not been signed into law by Chamorro and that they did not know when she would receive it officially. Once she is presented with the bill, she will have 15 days to sign or veto it, they said.

Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church in largely Catholic Nicaragua, recently expressed his support for the bill.

Josefina Ramos, vice president of the Center for Constitutional Rights, a private group in Managua, said in a telephone interview that the bill started as an initiative on behalf of women's rights.

"It was a proposal from the Sandinista legislature to change the wording regarding rape and sexual abuse, but when it came back to the floor, the Social Christians introduced the sodomy amendment. Now it is like you are going backward a few decades."