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Ugandan bishops reserve judgment on new anti-gay law

by James Martone by Catholic News Service

Cairo — Uganda's Catholic bishops reaffirmed their opposition to homosexuality, but reserved judgment on a recently ratified bill imposing harsh punishment for homosexual acts in the East African nation.

"Our reaction from the church is very clear, we don't support homosexuality," Msgr. John Baptist Kauta, secretary-general of the Uganda Episcopal Conference, told Catholic News Service by phone Feb. 26.

He said that when the anti-gay bill was first discussed, the country's bishops had been against the harsh penalties it involved for homosexual acts, including the death penalty.

"The bishops were not in favor of that," he said. "We were for compassion, and we believe (homosexuals) can change."

He said Uganda's bishops were in a retreat and would not be available to comment on the new law until early March.

"We normally don't want to overreact," he said.

Uganda's anti-gay bill was signed into law Feb. 24 by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni.

The bill originally proposed the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality," but first-time offenders will now face life in jail, instead of an originally proposed 14-year prison term.

Western donor countries and international rights groups have termed the new law an abuse of human rights and are asking for its repeal.

"The United States is deeply disappointed in the enactment of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda,"

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said in a statement.

"This is a tragic day for Uganda and for all who care about the cause of human rights," he said.

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In light of the new bill, the United States was reconsidering its relationship with Uganda, which receives millions of dollars in U.S. aid, said Kerry.

Michelle Kagari, Africa deputy director at Amnesty International, said the new law would "institutionalize hatred and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Uganda."

"Its passage into law signals a very grave episode in the nation's history," Kagari said in a statement.

There was no immediate reaction from the Vatican on the new law.

Earlier in February, however, the president of the Pontifical Council for the Family, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, said that the church's affirmation of the full dignity of all human beings led him to oppose laws that outlaw homosexuality.

Homosexuality is illegal in most African countries, and Western opposition to anti-gay measures is often criticized there as "imperialism."

Museveni maintained the law was necessary and accused the West of promoting homosexuality in Uganda and the rest of Africa.

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