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AFGHANISTAN: ‘The Taliban has a kill list’ for the Afghan LGBT community, NGO says

‘The Taliban has a kill list’ for the Afghan LGBT community, NGO says

Since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan at the end of August the persecution of the country’s LGBT+ community has ramped up, forcing many to live in hiding, fearing for their lives. “We now know for sure the Taliban has a ‘kill list’,” said the head of the Rainbow Railroad, a Canadian NGO helping under-threat Afghans to flee into exile.

By Louise Nordstrom

France24 (02.11.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3wf00Rq> – The situation for the LGBT+ community in Afghanistan has never been easy. Same-sex relations have always been taboo in the Muslim-majority country, where – even under the former Western-backed government – non-heterosexual relations were illegal and could lead to up to two years in prison.

But since the Taliban came to power after the US military withdrawal on August 30, the situation has deteriorated rapidly. Although the militant group has not yet officially said how it plans to deal with acts of homosexuality, reports are increasingly suggesting that the Taliban is applying a strict interpretation of Sharia law, under which same-sex relations may be punishable by death.

“This is a really scary time to be in Afghanistan,” Executive Director Kimahli Powell of Rainbow Railroad, the only international LGBT+ organisation on the ground in Afghanistan, told FRANCE 24 in a telephone interview.

“We now know for sure the Taliban has a ‘kill list’ circulating, identifying LBTQI+ persons.”

According to Powell, the Taliban most likely profited from the power vacuum that took place in the days and weeks leading up to the US withdrawal deadline to draw up these “kill lists” by paying close attention to the names of people that foreign rights groups were trying to evacuate. “After the fall of

Kabul, there was a lot of information sharing,” he said, noting that the people who never made it aboard any of the departing flights were instead left vulnerable, with their identities exposed.

Powell also said the Taliban seem to have complemented these lists through active persecution, by means of “entrapment” and data leaks.

“[Some] individuals who have reached out to us have told us about how they’ve received a mystery email from someone claiming to be connected with Rainbow Railroad asking for their information and passport. That’s how we know the information has been leaked.”

Spike in requests for help

Rainbow Railroad was founded in 2006 with the aim of helping at-risk LGBT+ people around the world flee violence and persecution in their homelands. In 2017, the group shot to worldwide fame after helping more than a hundred people escape persecution during the deadly [anti-gay purge in Chechnya](#). In the past few months, however, most of its efforts has been focused on Afghanistan, where it is helping threatened members of the local LGBT+ community find temporary refuge in safe houses, after which it tries to bring them “by land or by air” to permanent safety abroad.

“I can guarantee you already right now, that the number of requests we will receive this year will spike,” Powell said, noting that for Afghanistan alone, the group has already fielded 700 requests this year and identified at least 200 more people “in need of immediate evacuation”. The group usually receives a global total of 4,000 help requests per year.

In August, just prior to the US troop departure, Rainbow Railroad helped dozens of at-risk LGBT Afghans to safety via the military airlift. Last Friday, the NGO helped bring another [29 people](#) into Britain via a second airlift.

“There are private citizens [in Afghanistan] that have been keen to help. But as far as LGBTQ organisations go, it’s really just us there. But it has allowed us to form partnerships with non-LGBTQI+ groups who have also been getting people out,” he said.

Passport burned

Powell described a recent incident in which Rainbow Railroad was actively working to bring a threatened individual to safety, but who was then suddenly subjected to a Taliban raid. “People entered the house without any sort of uniform, and while ransacking the place they discovered information that made them suspect the person was part of the [LGBT+] community. Then they took their phone, through which they confirmed the person was a part of the community and proceeded to physically assault and humiliate the individual.

Then they found their passport and burned it.”

“The person is still there, and our job to try to get them to safety is now infinitely harder,” he said.

Turned in by family members

Powell described the current climate in Afghanistan as “lawless”, saying the general uncertainty and unpredictability of what Taliban rule entails for the population as a whole has even led to some people turning in family members for suspected LGBT+ activity.

“As I said, this is really scary times, and people are trying to curry favour with the Taliban,” he said. “I think everyone’s trying to navigate that environment, and so if they (the Taliban) have identified LGBTQ+ people as a target, there’s an incentive to turn them in.”

Powell said that this has left members of Afghanistan’s LGBT+ community even more vulnerable and isolated, since they can’t even count on the support and protection of their families. In the meantime, he said, they don’t have much choice but to hide.

“This has been the most complicated mission that we’ve done, and continues to be so.”

Photo credits: Rainbow Railroad

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