

LGBTI ORGANISATIONS WELCOME THE ACTION BY THE SAHRC

The Lesbian and Gay Equality Project, the Durban Gay and Lesbian Community Centre and the Sonke Gender Justice Network welcome the steps taken by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) to investigate statements allegedly made by King Goodwill Zwelithini at the 133rd annual celebrations of the historic Battle of Isandlwana, where the heroic Zulu army defeated British colonial forces. We warmly applaud the SAHRC for pro-actively executing its constitutional mandate without fear, favour or prejudice.

According to media reports, King Zwelithini told the august gathering that "traditionally" people did not engage in same-sex relationships. He is further quoted as saying: "There was nothing like that and, if you do it, you must know that you are rotten. I don't care how you feel about it. If you do it, you must know that it is wrong and you are rotten. Same-sex is not acceptable," (The Times newspaper)

The statements amount to a denigration of the dignity and rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and intersexed people (LGBTI). Such must be regarded as hate speech that tramples on the Constitution of our country which, in its Bill Rights, states that no person may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds including ... sexual orientation.... No matter what King Zwelithini's personal views are, as a public leader he is required to protect, promote and advance the Constitution. This is clearly implied by Section 212(1) of the Constitution which states that "The institution, status and role of traditional leadership, according to customary law, are recognised, subject to the Constitution". We expect no less!

We also note that the Premier of KwaZulu Natal, Zweli Mkhize, wants to meet the SAHRC to discuss the SAHRC action concerning King Zwelithini's statements. Media reports suggest that the Premier believes that the public has been misled with false reports about King Zwelithini's statements. Like Premier Mkhize, spokespersons of the Zulu Royal House have also suggested that the media have misinterpreted the King's words. We hope that these are genuine concerns and not face-saving measures to protect the dignity of the King whilst failing to take responsibility for, and correction action against hate speech.

It is important that the King, the Zulu Royal House and Premier Mkhize take responsibility for all actions and statements by the King or any person acting on their behalf. In doing this, they must not be allowed to distort the version of events at the Isandlwana commemoration. Once confirmed, this corrective action must include a full apology and a public statement confirming the King's respect for the Constitution and all the rights it enshrines. Our Constitution promises freedom, equality and dignity to all South Africans, including LGBTI citizens. We therefore, all have a responsibility to promote and advance the principles of the Constitution; in particular we need to encourage cohesion and respect for diversity. We dream of a South Africa where Kings, traditional leaders, religious leaders and political leaders encourage acceptance and tolerance of difference.

We humbly request our leaders to be cautious of what they say, particularly in the public domain as that will avoid potential misinterpretation. It is unfortunate that the media always has to be blamed for "irresponsible interpretation" of irresponsible statements made by those in positions of power.

The three organizations will monitor the progress in relation to the SAHRC efforts to get to the bottom of the King's statement to the Isandlwana commemoration.

For more information you can contact the following people:

1. Desmond Lesejane – Deputy Director for Sonke Gender Justice Network @ 339 3589
2. Nonhlanhla Mkhize- Director of Durban Lesbian and Gay Community and Health center @ 083-748-9565
3. Virginia Magwaza Setshedi- Executive Director of the Lesbian and Gay Equality Project @ 082 082 3059