June 24, 2014

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President:

We thank you for your recent actions in response to Uganda’s Anti-Homosexuality Act, including the redirection of a number of U.S. investments.

At the same time we are concerned that your invitation to President Yoweri Museveni, as well as to Nigeria President Goodluck Jonathan to join a White House African leadership summit in Washington, D.C. in early August sends a mixed message to leaders worldwide on our human rights stance. This is a pivotal concern as Museveni makes a decision about whether to sign additional damaging legislation in his country.

The HIV and AIDS Prevention and Control Act has passed the Uganda parliament and is awaiting President Museveni’s signature. It would criminalize HIV transmission and attempted transmission and hold pregnant women hostage to mandates for HIV testing and treatment or risk imprisonment. As clinicians and researchers, we have grave concerns about the implications of the pending law. Such policies encourage individuals to remain ignorant of their HIV status and contribute substantially to the stigma associated with HIV infection, which will only fuel an epidemic that is already growing in Uganda. We abhor the HIV criminalization laws that have been enacted by numerous states in this country, and have worked to aggressively challenge them. In a highly affected country like Uganda with HIV prevalence of more than 7.2 percent, such a law will not only be disastrous for the individuals directly affected, but will also put whole communities at risk by fueling HIV infection. The bill promises further erosion of basic human rights and threats to that country’s AIDS response if it is signed by President Museveni.

We have seen real and severe consequences to gay and lesbian people as a result of the anti-gay laws in both Nigeria and Uganda. These consequences have included challenges accessing critical health care services. The enactment of The HIV and AIDS Prevention and Control Act would make a very difficult environment much worse, and contrary to its title, would surely undermine HIV prevention and potential control over the HIV epidemic in Uganda. We have already seen the overzealous prosecution of an HIV-infected Ugandan nurse who was sentenced to three years in prison following a workplace accident in which no one was infected, demonstrating the significant and destructive stigma surrounding the epidemic there.
Meanwhile, President Museveni enjoys increased political support at home and garners additional U.S. military resources, while Uganda assumes the leadership of the United Nations General Assembly this fall. An invitation to a high-level White House meeting that is denied to other African leaders who have abused the human rights of their citizens, leaves little incentive for President Museveni to withhold his signature to the latest draconian policy that is now before him.

We appreciate that the ability of the U.S. government to influence President Museveni is limited. But the U.S. investment in Uganda is significant. U.S. support for the Ugandan HIV response has been profound and transforming, and is now threatened. We respectfully ask that you keep this investment and the lives it represents foremost in your mind and in U.S. policy as you respond to the Ugandan government and the very real threat presented by the anti-homosexuality law and the pending bill to criminalize HIV transmission.

Sincerely,

Kenneth H. Mayer, MD, FIDSA
Co-Chair, IDSA/HIVMA Center for Global Health Policy; Infectious Disease Attending and Director of HIV Prevention, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center; Lecturer in Medicine, Harvard Medical School; Medical Research Director, The Fenway Institute, Fenway Health

Joel Gallant, MD, MPH, FIDSA
Chair, HIV Medicine Association Infectious Diseases Southwest CARE Center