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**LGBT GROUP WARNS CARICOM MORALITY PETITION MAY
BACKFIRE, SENDING BODY'S GLOBAL HIV MONEY TO CIVIL SOCIETY**

Port of Spain, 1 July 2015. Leaders of a regional coalition of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) organizations sent a letter today to CARICOM's leadership, urging them not to fall prey to a regional panic in response to equal marriage. CariFLAGS likened calls in a 33,000+ signature evangelical petition to CARICOM that targets LGBT people to the Dominican Republic's treatment of people of Haitian descent, urging the regional body to oppose both.

Using a multilingual social media platform that also mobilized international support for Russia's anti-homosexual propaganda law and the death-penalty anti-homosexuality law in Uganda, a Jamaican evangelical Christian group, the Jamaica Coalition for a Healthy Society (JCHS), has collected thousands of private signatures globally for a "civil society declaration" to CARICOM. They plan to deliver it to the regional organ at its Barbados Heads of Government meeting this week on sustainable development that the secretary general of the United Nations (which is targeted in the online petition) will attend.

Evoking faith, family and Caribbean freedom struggles, the JCHS e-petition calls on CARICOM to adopt policies that deny rights recognition to people who engage in what they call unnatural and unhealthy sexual behaviours. Though the "declaration" also mentions euthanasia and abortion, it grounds its concerns and fears in six examples, all of them recent efforts in the region to promote sexual health and protect rights of LGBT Caribbean people.

JCHS has in the past successfully targeted CARICOM's HIV policymaking and programmes, and weakened CARICOM leadership commitment to creating an enabling environment for reversing the Caribbean's role as the second most affected in the world by the epidemic, which is a key threat to the region's development. Last year, in the wake of JCHS's mobilisation in support for Brendan Bain, the University of the West Indies lost significant international funding for HIV. Retired Prof. Bain was relieved of roles as a regional policymaker with CARICOM and UWI and censured because of conflicts of interest in court testimony solicited by religious groups opposed to CARICOM policy.

CariFLAGS, the region's 18-year-old coalition of leading LGBT organizations, says the impact of JCHS's current petition, and any CARICOM embrace of it, may be similar. They believe it will likely result in the transfer of millions of dollars in funds from global HIV donors, which is earmarked for addressing policy, stigma and discrimination, from CARICOM to civil society groups like theirs. An initial CARICOM application for such funds was turned down on its first round. They believe CARICOM must stand up for principle if it wants to continue to lead the region's response to HIV. They urged CARICOM leaders to ensure neither Dominicans of Haitian descent nor Caribbean LGBT people are cast out of justice, citizenship or the nation.

CariFLAGS's mission is to build Caribbean nations where LGBT people enjoy full fruits of citizenship, and to build cultural understanding, policy, litigation and domestic movements that enable that. CariFLAGS serves on the regional coordinating mechanism for the Caribbean HIV response.

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1 July 2015

**Dear CARICOM Heads of Government,
CARICOM Secretary General Irwin LaRocque, and
CARICOM Assistant Secretary General Douglas Slater**

Ensure Leadership & Funding to Preserve Healthy, Just Caribbean Societies

Caribbean peoples dearly treasure freedoms that our fore-fathers and mothers valiantly fought and died for. Freedom for our bodies, and for our ability as individual Caribbean people to self-determine, no matter our gender, race, faith or social station. We, their descendants, must routinely and soundly reject new forms of colonialism and injustice, and any attempts at re-interpretation of international human rights that in their very definition deny such rights to particular groups of people whom others define as undesirables or unholy because of their aspirations and desires. In the twenty-first century, we cannot be writing people out of justice, citizenship or the nation, whether they are of Haitian descent or lesbian and gay. We especially cannot engage in such social violence through a rhetoric of faith and family. Single people in our families, people in non-marital unions, and family forms that have disobeyed those seen as “decent” by our dominators are among the most Caribbean forms of kinship—ones that buttressed our collective resilience and dignity.

Many in our region are in a panic over a court decision in the United States, which has joined 20 countries, with a combined population of over a billion people, where civil marriage to someone of the same sex is an option. This panic builds on earlier anxieties some have been stirring up in the region that Caribbean citizens using our post-Independence institutions of justice (including international conventions to which our nations have voluntarily committed) to achieve bodily autonomy and dignity they have been denied since colonialism will prevent the efforts of some faiths to ensure that a specific “moral” order holds dominion over the region.

The Jamaica Coalition for a Healthy Society (JCHS) has made CARICOM’s HIV response a special target of their dominionist advocacy and agenda of faith-based social injustice. They have appointed themselves as “cultural watchmen” in preserving an old order they see under threat. They promote collaboration between churches and public health officials to keep legal regimes of sexuality-based stigma and discrimination firmly in place. Their destruction of PANCAP’s hard effort and consensus-building around *Justice for All*, a bold initiative to address health justice issues that drive HIV, is well known.

Their advocacy and the ambivalence of regional political leadership has cost us important gains in a critical area of Caribbean human development—as our regional institutions have failed to engage us in an expansion of sexual and reproductive rights that would lead to improved health and prosperity. Instead, we remain the second leader in the world in the harmful impact of HIV, and our region’s best collective intelligence about how to end that is under consistent assault by a forceful minority seeking to deny rights to other minorities more vulnerable than they. Soon these forces’ skilful advocacy will also cost us key resources that support HIV infrastructure, personnel and services.

JCHS has placed a petition on an international internet platform that also campaigned for the Russian “anti-propaganda” law that forbids public promotion of the rights of LGBT people, and for

Scott Lively, the American evangelist being sued in US court there over his role in promoting the Uganda death-sentence homosexuality law that punished people for not turning in homosexual family members. The petition, in English, French and Spanish, and open to anyone with internet access in the world, encourages “allies from around the world” to sign; but names are kept from public view.

Some 35,000 such “signatures” will be presented to you when you meet in Barbados this week, at the very moment when the region’s HIV response is also under critical scrutiny, and close to \$12 million in global funding for this threat to the region’s health, economy and sustainable development hangs in the balance.

JCHS would love to see this funding and the human rights work and accountability it is intended to support go away. Their petition pointedly labels scientific knowledge on sexuality “false”, and appeals for you to protect them in spreading junk science and other misinformation .

Do not give in to panic. Hold fast to the collective principles of our regional HIV response: an evidence-basis for our understanding and interventions; creation of an enabling environment and mitigation of stigma and discrimination; and an inclusion of affected communities in charting the response. Remember that human rights is grounded on equality for all and non-discrimination. Your steadfastness and leadership are needed now more than ever. Do not give in to the mob. Ensure CARICOM is in the best position to secure global AIDS funding for the region we are urgently at risk of seeing go to other grantees.

As you meet in Barbados to plan for Vibrant Societies and Resilient Economies, please send a clear message that neither can be achieved through discrimination, and that a post-2015 sustainable development agenda must expand sexual and reproductive rights and health across the region and include a robust, human rights- and evidence-based HIV response. Discrimination and casting people out can no more be tools for addressing HIV, sexual diversity, development and building families in our 21st century Caribbean than they can for our brothers and sisters of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic who are victims of the same human rights niggling and narrow-mindedness our JCHS colleagues encourage you to adopt.

We welcome other civil society groups and regional leaders to join our call.

Dane Lewis
Jamaica
Co-Chair

Colin Robinson
Trinidad & Tobago
Secretariat Manager

Tieneke Sumter
Suriname
Co-Chair

CariFLAGS: Caribbean Forum for Liberation and Acceptance of Genders and Sexualities