

Gay violence gets international attention

AMSTERDAM | Of all gay friendly cities in the world, anti-gay violence is most structurally reported in Amsterdam, Human Rights Watch manager of gay rights Boris Dittrich tells *The Hague/ Amsterdam/ Rotterdam Times*. The news is dramatic, but there is a positive side to it as well.

By Lula Ahrens

Boris Dittrich is the former party leader of D66. As a Human Rights Watch manager in New York he now receives reports on anti-gay violence from all over the world. "I receive reports on anti-gay violence in Amsterdam every single week", he tells *The Times*. "That does not go for cities like London, Berlin and Barcelona. People are shocked by these reports. They ask me what for Gods' sake is going on in The Netherlands. The impression they get is that it is highly dangerous for homosexuals to walk around in Amsterdam." Asked whether the fact that people report these incidents can also be regarded as a good sign, meaning that the Dutch are concerned about their tolerant reputation being at stake, he answered: "Yes, the fact that these crimes are reported is excellent in itself. The fact that gay lobby organisation COC, the government and the police are drawing attention to this development is a huge difference with countries where homosexuals are left to fend for themselves. But it is also terrible that homosexuals who hold hands in Amsterdam run the risk of being beaten up".

Dittrich says he is not sure whether the immigrant Muslim population is largely to blame, as many media suggest: "Other large cities with a high number of immigrants such as Barcelona do not face the same problems. I do however see that a certain roughness has crept into Dutch society. People think that they can tell each other anything within the public debate. Other countries are more polite. The Netherlands has Geert Wilders who wants to ban the Koran, for instance. People are being hurt. They project their feelings of hatred on Western values regarding homosexuality and other rights and freedoms."

"Ten years ago, the situation was completely different. Back then, gay life in The Netherlands was flourishing. Events like Gay Pride attracted thousands of homosexuals. Nowadays homosexuals avoid Amsterdam due to the violence. They rather go to Berlin or Barcelona, where none of this is going on. All in all you could conclude that our gay-friendly image has."

Gay lobby organisation COC, CDA and PvdA want perpetrators of anti-gay violence to be punished twice as severe as perpetrators of other forms of violence on account of combining violence with discrimination.

"I agree that a prison sentence could be an effective measure", Dittrich says. "It is also very important to find out why these people are specifically after homosexuals; to explore their mentality. With that knowledge, one can then address this issue elaborately in schools. It is also very important to continue recording these incidents and details on the victims and perpetrators, because that contributes to scientific research. Measurement equals knowledge."

Human Rights Watch is satisfied with the authorities' reaction to the violence. According to Dittrich, the Dutch government is still leading the way in propagating homosexual rights. He concludes: "Amsterdam continues to be a terrific city. I am not a pessimist. History teaches us that these are phases that societies have to go through."