



A Statement from the ILGA-ASIA BOARD

on the Cancellation of 4th ILGA-Asia Conference in Surabaya, Indonesia

The 4th ILGA ASIA conference was to take place in Surabaya, Indonesia from the 26th to the 28th of March 2010, however, due to unforeseen and unfortunate circumstances, the conference had to be cut short.

ILGA is the only worldwide federation campaigning for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) rights and was established in 1978. The aim of ILGA is to work for the equality of LGBTI people and their liberation from all forms of discrimination. It seeks to achieve this aim through the worldwide cooperation and mutual support of its members.

ILGA ASIA is the Asian branch of ILGA and it has successfully organised conferences in India, the Philippines and Thailand in the past. ILGA ASIA has over 160 member organisations in more than 17 countries across Asia.

ILGA Asia accepted the proposal of GAYa NUSANTARA, the oldest LGBT organisation in Indonesia, to host the fourth Regional Conference of ILGA Asia in Surabaya, Indonesia.

The conference organisers received endorsements from the local city police to hold the conference. However, as news of the conference became known to local media and groups of fundamentalists, who opposed the conference, they began to threaten to disrupt the conference and upset the participants with violent protests. The police withdrew their endorsement of the conference fearing to not be able to control the fundamentalists and the safety of the conference participants. ILGA ASIA was then forced to announce that the conference was “officially” cancelled.

The conference was to be held at the Mercure Hotel (Accor Hotels Group), with many of the participants coming from all over Asia and who were staying at the hotel. The management of the hotel then decided that they were very uncomfortable to host the conference and accommodate the participants. Two days prior to the start of the conference, the management of the hotel demanded all the participants to vacate their rooms, which had been paid for, and find alternative accommodation. The Oval Hotel, kindly accepted to host the event and provide the rooms needed for those who had to leave Mercure. The conference organisers tried their best to mobilise as much support from high-level public figures, to persuade the police to return to their initial endorsement, but to no avail.

On Thursday the 25th of March the ILGA ASIA board called for a meeting with all the participants and explained the situation to them and the possible risks in continuing with the conference. In spite of all the threats and potential risks, the participants and the board decided to go ahead with a “meeting of activists”, as this is why they had come to Surabaya. The ILGA ASIA board commends the commitment and determination of the activists in Asia and their tenacity in wishing to persevere with the agenda under extremely difficult circumstances and to help build a world where all people are free and equal.

In the morning of Friday the 26th of March at 8.30am, the activists gathered in the corridor of the 4th floor of the Oval Hotel where Dédé Oetomo, director of GAYa NUSANTARA, Poedjiati Tan and Sahran Abeyesundara, representatives of ILGA ASIA to ILGA, welcomed all the delegates and declared the “Meeting of Activists” open. Four energy packed workshops were carried out throughout the morning taking place in rooms of the

board members for security reasons. Over 100 representatives from more than 12 countries participated and the atmosphere was electric.

By midday the board had received information that a group of fundamentalists had mobilised themselves after Friday prayers and were heading towards the hotel. For the safety of the participants and in the best interest of all those involved, the board decided to cancel the programme of events for the afternoon session. The heads of the fundamentalist groups entered the hotel and sat around a table in the lobby, adjacent to the elevators, talking to one another, while other demonstrators grew into a larger threatening crowd outside of the hotel lobby. The heads of the opposing groups (the Unity Front of the Community of Islam (FPUI), an ad-hoc coalition of 7 conservative and hard-line Islamic groups including the Indonesian Council of Ulemas (MUI), Indonesia's top Muslim clerical body, the Islamic Defender Front (FPI), a local extremist group that is known for violent tactics, and the Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), a local chapter of a worldwide network by the same name that is believed to be very active in a number of countries including the United Kingdom despite being banned by many governments) demanded to speak to the ILGA ASIA organisers and Mr King Oey, a member of the ILGA ASIA board and part of the organising committee tried to reason with them, only to be assaulted in return.

Moments later, the regional board and the Secretaries General of ILGA and the communications team met to analyse the situation and to take necessary measures and further precautions. This involved hours of negotiation with the police and the management of the hotel. At around 4 pm, dozens more protesters arrived at the Oval Hotel and the atmosphere became more heated. The police wanted to terminate their responsibility by pressuring the conference delegates and organisers to leave the hotel immediately. Only after the mediation of some prominent public figures who were among the participants, the police finally offered protection to the participants and the hotel management accepted that they could remain in the hotel until the end of their reservations. The police also negotiated with the demonstrators and told them that it had decided to give protection to the delegates. The demonstrators however refused to leave and began to put more and more pressure on to the organising committee promising to return armed the next day. By early evening, it became necessary to evacuate the participants in groups of four. Some were aided by their embassies, others who managed to change their flights were taken directly to the airport, whilst others were moved to different hotels and some left Surabaya by land to neighbouring cities. A few remained at the hotel as "tourists". The ILGA ASIA board wishes to thank all Indonesian activists who coordinated and put their necks on the line to ensure the safety of all the participants.

On Sunday 29 March, news spread quickly regarding an article that appeared in the Jakarta Post that morning, that the fundamentalists had threatened to come to the Oval hotel and physically remove all remaining foreigners and to take them directly to the airport. The Secretaries General of ILGA left the hotel with the last participants to a hotel near the airport, where the last departures were arranged. On the same day, news spread in relation to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, announcing a court action against the organising committee for "activities against religion".

All international participants left Indonesia and have arrived safely back to their home countries leaving the Indonesian activists to face harder challenges ahead of them.

ILGA, as part of an international coalition of LGBTI rights defenders, has initiated a coordinated operation to denounce and protest against the attack that occurred, with the concerned international bodies and to demand action from these as a result. Many voices have risen, in Indonesia and in different countries around the world, demanding the respect of human rights of LGBT people and the right to assembly.

The demand of action is based on the fact that in Indonesia:

- (a) The constitution has a strong equality clause
- (b) The constitution is based on secular principles
- (c) Indonesia has ratified the major UN human rights treaties

The ILGA ASIA board wishes to thank all the activists that had assembled from all parts of Asia and for showing great courage in the face adversity. We wish to thank our funders [Global Fund for Women, Astraea, LGBTI Initiative of Open Society Institute, Hivos, Fridae and Oxfam-Novib] who have stood by us through this difficult time and have been a great source of strength. We are blessed by the many men and women in the Indonesian government who have stood up for our rights and have spoken out against the fundamentalists. But most of all, we are forever grateful to our Indonesian partners and the organizing team for showing great resolve and for standing up for what they believe in and showing the world what activism is all about. They are an inspiration to us all, their courage is to be admired and their commitment to a world free of prejudice and hate is a testimony to who they are.

The ILGA ASIA board stands firm in our belief that all people are created equal and free and that we all have the right to live as we are, and to love who we love. This incident has not weakened our movement but has only made us stronger. For we know our work is important and what we do changes the lives of so many people around Asia and the world. Our determination is that much stronger and our belief is that much more. Our work is not over until all people can live in a world that accepts us for who we are.

In Solidarity,

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