NAIROBI, Jan 13 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - The United Nations has called for LGBT+ Ugandans to be treated with respect and dignity, following homophobic remarks by some politicians, including the president, ahead of Thursday's polls.

Sexual minorities face widespread persecution in Uganda, where gay sex is punishable by life imprisonment, and LGBT+ rights groups fear politicians exploiting anti-gay sentiment to win votes could stoke fresh attacks on the community.

Winnie Byanyima, head of UNAIDS, the U.N. agency for HIV and AIDS, said the vilification of LGBT+ people could worsen violence and discrimination and reduce their access to HIV/AIDS treatment.

"Using offensive language that describes LGBT people as 'deviant' is simply wrong," said Byanyima in a statement late on Tuesday, referring to comments made by President Yoweri Museveni in a media interview last week.

"Stigma and discrimination based on sexual orientation violates rights and keeps people away from HIV testing, treatment, prevention and care services."

Museveni, 76, is seeking to extend his 34-year rule, but is facing a challenge from 11 candidates, including Robert Kyagulanyi, a pop star turned lawmaker, also known as Bobi Wine who has won popular support with the youth.

Campaigning ahead of Thursday's vote has been marred by brutal crackdowns on opposition rallies that have left more than 50 dead, and the repeated intimidation and arrest of some opposition candidates, their supporters and campaign staff.

In an interview with Britain's Channel 4 News on Friday, Museveni repeated remarks made in a November rally that the opposition was receiving support from foreign LGBT+ groups.
"In Europe, you promote them. You promote homosexuality. You think homosexuality is an alternative way of life," Museveni told Channel 4 News.

"While for us here, we think it is a deviation."

LGBT+ Ugandans say local politicians have also been using anti-gay remarks to stir up hatred and win votes by making pledges to eradicate homosexuality in Uganda.

"These remarks and the generally tense atmosphere in the country has made me fearful to go out and vote," said a 32-year-old gay Ugandan man, who declined to be named. "We know when these politicians say anti-gay things, people come after us."

It is not unusual for harassment of LGBT+ Ugandans to spike following homophobic remarks by politicians.
Attacks on LGBT+ people rose in 2019 after a minister proposed bringing back the death penalty for gay sex. The government later denied the plan.

UNAIDS said Uganda had made considerable progress against the HIV epidemic, with 80% of an estimated 1.5 million people living with the virus receiving treatment.

However, gay men were less likely to access HIV testing, treatment, prevention and care services, partly due to stigma and discrimination in health care settings and throughout society, it added.

"It's clear that to end the AIDS epidemic in Uganda there is a need to build a more inclusive society where everyone enjoys the right to health," said Byanyima.

"UNAIDS stands ready to work with all partners to end stigma and discrimination against the LGBT community and achieve the full respect of their universal human rights."

https://news.trust.org/item/20210113112215-bbykb/