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Through Rainbow-Colored Glasses

By Christine Dinsmore

One of the difficulties about writing for a bimonthly publication is that what appears like a timely topic can be as stale as yesterday's bagel by the time it hits the stands. So I made a vow this month to avoid the issue *du jour*. While the United Nations has been in the news a lot this past year, its stand on gay rights has not been a hot button issue—except for the wider queer community.

Two gay-related issues abuzz there: the United Nations Human Rights Commission's waffling on calling for the end to discrimination based on sexual orientation and Secretary-General Kofi Annan's directive to grant family benefits to U.N. staff whose same-sex relationships are formally recognized in their home country. Both of these developments have been cause for celebration in some international gay circles.

The Human Rights Commission failed to officially take a position on sexual orientation discrimination because, for a second year in a row, Brazil withdrew a resolution to protect gay civil rights. The South American country bowed to economic and political pressure from the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Vatican. In spite of roughly a third of all countries in the world outlawing gay relationships, some optimists are mollifying themselves with the cry, "Wait 'til next year."

On the Kofi Annan domestic partnership front, members of the Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual Employees of the UN (GLOBE) are elated. The fact that the unholy alliance of the OIC and the Vatican failed to derail the recognition of the same-sex unions and that the other arm of the alliance, Washington, D.C., remained silent on the issue, was seen as a victory by the group. A GLOBE member e-mailed me awhile back and asked if I heard the "good news" about the UN domestic partnership benefits. I had, but it just didn't seem like such a breakthrough. By my count that meant that staff from about 10 countries would be affected—of the 191 nations that make up the international body.

But the excitement was coming from a gay man who would be thrown into prison in his own country if he were out. Now I'm not a big "count your blessings" kind of person when it comes to degrees of bad news, but other people's reality can put things in perspective. As a reporter covering the Gay Games in Amsterdam in 1998, I will never forget the opening parade of nations with the lone athlete from Iran joining the fanfare hidden behind a mask. (Iran is one of nine countries where homosexual acts are punishable by death. And one of three nations that

has executed gays within the last decade, according to the International Lesbian and Gay Association.)

A handful of people receiving recognition of their gay families or a future opportunity—even if ever so slight—for an international human rights organization to protect the civil rights of the queer community can seem laudable. Maybe at times a celebration of half measures is better than nothing.

The momentary joy over these incremental steps is just that—momentary. As the UN tried to stand up for its gay employees and inched closer to submitting a resolution to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation worldwide, Singapore and Zanzibar joined the circle of bigotry, each making it a crime to be gay.

If the unholy alliance can bring equality to its knees through the almighty buck, maybe our community can weaken discrimination with our own economic clout. I'm crossing Singapore and Zanzibar off my list of vacation destinations. I wonder how the swimming is in São Paulo.