**4 Accused Gays Whipped in North Nigerian Court**

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By Michelle Faul

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Four young men were convicted of gay sex and whipped publicly as punishment Thursday in an Islamic court in northern Nigeria, a human rights activist said.

The four were among dozens caught in a wave of arrests after Nigeria strengthened its criminal penalties for homosexuality with the new Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act in January.

The men could face further violence in prison if human rights organizations do not come up with an additional fine of 20,000 naira ($120) each meted out Thursday by a judge in Bauchi city, Dorothy Aken'Ova, convenor of the Coalition for the Defense of Sexual Rights Network, told The Associated Press. The four were sentenced to 15 strokes plus a year's imprisonment if they cannot pay their fines.

Aken'Ova said the men, aged between 20 and 22, should not have been convicted because their confessions were forced by law agents who beat them.

She said they had to lie on the floor of the court to be whipped on their backsides.

The men's families, mainly subsistence farmers in rural areas where everyone knows everyone else, refused an offer of legal representation because they preferred to negotiate with the judge and get the case behind them, said Aken'Ova. She said the families were embarrassed by the stigma attached to homosexuality, which many highly religious Nigerians consider an evil imported from the West.

The hearings in Bauchi city, capital of the state of the same name, had been delayed from January, when a crowd tried to stone the accused men outside the court and demanded the judge pass the death sentence. Security officials had to fire into the air to save the men and disperse the crowd.

Under Islamic Shariah law in some north Nigerian states, homosexuals can be sentenced to death by stoning or lethal injection, though that sentence has never been enforced.

Aken'Ova, who got her information from the men's families, said the judge was lenient because the men had promised that the homosexual acts occurred in the past and that they had since changed their ways.

For fear of further disruption, Judge El-Yakub Aliyu held hearings on Thursday unannounced and in secret. He said the hearing for another four men accused of sodomy would be heard at a later date.