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Minister's anti-gay tweet on AIDS draws flak

JAKARTA: A government minister who has in the past blamed natural disasters on immorality has caused more controversy by posting anti-gay comments on Twitter and joking about people with AIDS.

Tifatul Sembiring, who is information minister and also a member of the National AIDS Commission, jumped into a debate about a gay film festival being held here, which was opposed by hardliners and students.

"Behaviours which are potentially carrying the virus must be prevented," he tweeted last week, adding that even the Quran had things to say about homosexuals: "God turned the earth upside down" and "rained them with stones from the burnt land."

In his most controversial comment, however, he recalled a former health minister's joke about AIDS.

"AIDS — *Akibat Itunya Dipakai Sembarangan*", which translates as "because they were reckless about where they put their genitals".

He later said he didn't mean to offend anyone, adding: "But everyone has the right to voice his opinion."

Ricky Gunawan, the programme director of the Legal Aid Foundation, was quoted as saying by *The Globe* newspaper that, as a public figure and member of the AIDS commission, Tifatul should be more responsible.

The comments were "misleading" and further stigmatised those living with the disease, said Ricky, who noted that only three per cent of the country's estimated 21,000 AIDS patients were believed to be homosexuals.

Tifatul, a member of the Prosperous Justice Party, which believes Is-

lam should play a central role in public life, eagerly embraced social networking site Twitter when he assumed his ministerial post last year and has more than 92,000 followers. —AP



Tifatul Sembiring says everyone has the right to voice his opinion