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Indonesian Minister draws flak for AIDS comment

JAKARTA: An Indonesian 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 in Jakarta, which was protested by Islamic hard-liners and students.

"Behaviors 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 their opinion."

Ricky Gunawan, the program 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, Sembiring should be more responsible.

The comments are "misleading" and further stigmatize those living with the disease, said Gunawan, who noted that only 3 percent of the country's estimated 21,000 AIDS patients are believed to be homosexuals.

Sembiring, a member of the Prosperous Justice Party, which believes Islam 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.

The 49-year-old has used Twitter to share his views on the dangers posed by pornography in Indonesia, a secular country with more Muslims than any other. He also said last year that a link between natural disasters and immoral behavior couldn't be ruled out, drawing sharp criticism from earthquake victims.

While the minister's micro-blogging exploits have gotten widespread attention in the local media, there is little chance he will be punished. He was well-known for his conservative views before he was appointed. — AP