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Anger as Indian minister calls homosexuality 'disease'

NEW DELHI: Indian gay rights activists voiced shock and outrage yesterday over public comments by the Health Minister who said that homosexuality was a "disease" brought to the country by foreigners.

Speaking at a national meeting Monday of district and mayoral leaders on HIV/AIDS prevention, Health Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad stated that homosexuality was "unnatural and not good for India." "It is a disease which has come from other countries," he added. "Even though it is unnatural, it exists in our country and is now fast spreading, making it tough to detect it."

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the President of the ruling Congress party Sonia Gandhi also attended the meeting, but had left before Azad spoke.

Coming almost two years to the day after a landmark Delhi High Court ruling that decriminalised homosexuality, his comments prompted a storm of protest and calls for an immediate retraction.

"I think the Minister needs to apologise immediately. He has insulted the entire homosexual community," said Mohnish Kabir Malhotra, a publicist and gay rights activist. "Homosexuality is very much a part of nature and it even finds references in religious texts. To call it unnatural is absurd," Malhotra told AFP.

There was particular anger that the comments were made at a meeting of officials tasked with promoting and enforcing HIV/AIDS prevention policy at a grassroots level across the country. - AFP