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## DEATH THREATS PUT OFF LGBTQ ETHIOPIA TOUR

Chicago-based Toto Tours, founded in 1990 by Dan Ware, is facing extreme opposition to an upcoming tour to Ethiopia. “It seems that most of the country has risen up against us,” Ware said. His mission has always been to create a safe and comfortable environment in which members of the LGBTQ community can travel the world together and benefit from interactions with other cultures. That work proceeded uninterrupted for 29 years, even to countries such as Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania where anti-gay laws are on the books, until now, according to Ware.

On May 25, while escorting a group through Bulgaria and Romania, Ware received an email from a gay Ethiopian warning that “...there is a campaign against you and your clients by some so called ‘activists’ in Ethiopia, for being an inclusive tour company and I thought you should know about the matter, for the safety of your employees and clients.” This warning was soon followed by an avalanche of hate mail and death threats describing a menu of gruesome ways any gay person would be killed if he or she dared to set foot on Ethiopian soil.

Nationwide protests were organized, and major religious organizations spoke out against the planned visit from their public platforms. At a government sponsored event, the mayor of Addis Ababa promised the crowd that Toto Tours would be unwelcome in his city in response to a question from the audience. Even the Pope of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church made a video statement condemning the tour.

On June 10 Ware wrote an appeal to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism for "...a formal declaration about the permissibility of our planned tour in October 2019. If we are banned, we feel it is only fair that you provide us with the legal foundation for that decision. If we are welcome, it is necessary for you to be on the record so that the people will know they must treat us in a civil and respectful manner." A similar appeal was also sent to the office of the Prime Minister. Neither has been answered to date.

Now, one month after the hate campaign against Toto Tours began and considering the unwillingness of any governmental agency to speak definitively on the issue, Ware has decided that the advertised tour cannot go forward. "I had planned to continue pressing for an answer from the government," Ware said, "but the news a couple of days ago that the chief of staff of the Ethiopian army had been shot by his own bodyguard and the governor of the Amhara region was killed, along with an adviser, made it clear that even if the government was behind our plans, and publicly welcomed us, there could be no guarantee of our safety."

“What is truly ironic,” said Ware, “is that just two years ago Ethiopia was named as the world’s most welcoming country resulting from a poll on the popular travel site *Rough Guides*. We’re not feeling the love, nor are the gay people who live in this inhospitable atmosphere. It is a sad day when people are prevented from meeting and getting to know each other by an irrational hatred that runs counter to the teachings of the very religion they purportedly uphold.”

Ware considers the connections he has made with gay Ethiopians throughout this past month the silver lining around the cloud of hate that gathered over his business. One particularly touching appeal asked him “...to please speak on behalf of us. First, tell them so many Ethiopians throughout the country are living this life secretly. ... Sadly, tell them we are dying for lack of appropriate healthcare services. Many in our community are committing suicide because of discrimination, stress, hate speech, loneliness, etc.”

Earlier this month Botswana overturned its laws criminalizing homosexuality. Ware holds to his vision that travel is a catalyst for improving the lives of both visitors and hosts in a myriad of ways. “I have the utmost respect for all the cultures I have been fortunate to relate with over the past 30 years. It has been my great honor to have facilitated harmonious interactions between diverse people around the world for all these years. I hope to travel to Ethiopia openly someday,” Ware says, “and to embrace the people there. May we recognize our common humanity, and that we have nothing to fear from each other.”