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**Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals & Gays**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**J-FLAG Celebrates 13 Years of Promoting Tolerance for Gays**

Kingston --- December 9, 2011

Jamaica has come a long way in promoting respect and tolerance for the human rights of Jamaicans who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) but much more needs to be done to make Jamaica a cohesive and just society where everyone can live, work and raise their family.

J-FLAG was launched on December 10, 1998 as Jamaica's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights advocacy group by twelve business people, educators, lawyers, public relations practitioners and human rights activists to advocate for protection from state-sanctioned and community violence. In this regard, J-FLAG's call was for the fair and equal treatment of gays and lesbians under the law and by the ordinary citizen.

Thirteen years ago there were more dancehall and reggae artistes singing homophobic songs, more persons right to life was being violated because of their sexual orientation, the Commissioner of Police would never instruct police officers to respect the rights of all civilians, regardless of their sexual preference, political representatives would never meet with us and publicly support LGBT rights, the media would never openly advocate the repeal of the buggery law, and HIV programmes were not catering to the needs of gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (MSM). Today, 7% of HIV/AIDS organisations in Jamaica are working with MSM, more and more research is being done on homosexuality and homophobia in Jamaica, there are social and entertainment spaces that are friendly and for LGBT people and there are more than five LGBT focussed organisations and many support groups across the island.

The truth is more of us are realising that human rights belong to every one of us without exception and more of us are promoting this concept. However, unless we know them, unless we demand that they be respected, and unless we defend our rights to love and care for each other without distinction, these rights will be just words in a decades-old documents.

However, despite our progress over the years, this year alone J-FLAG received more than sixty reports of murder, mob attacks, extortion, home evictions and verbal and physical abuse. Tomorrow is Human Rights Day, and as Hon. Rudyard Spencer said on December 1, 2011 at the Leaders' Breakfast on HIV and AIDS, "we should not ignore the cries of those who continue to suffer because we fail to do what is right. It is time to be courageous and to be strong. It is time to usher our country into a new day where justice, liberty and freedom prevail for all." It is important that we begin recognizing and respecting the rights and beliefs of others.

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J-FLAG strongly believes that the next government must take the steps needed to promote tolerance and respect for human rights, regardless of, inter alia, sexual orientation and protect LGBT persons from abuse. Already the United Nations Human Rights Committee has instructed the government to report by the end of 2012 on the steps it will take to come into full compliance with its human rights obligations. We stand ready to assist our government on issues of concern to many Jamaicans with respect to the rights of the LGBT community.

Here are five concrete things the leaders of both political parties can do if they form the next government and can easily accomplish within a year. These are:

- Taking Leadership for Human Rights,
- Promoting Equality and Non-Discrimination,
- Tackling Crime and Violence,
- Integrating Sexuality Issues within Gender Policy and
- Ensuring Every Child Learn in Safe Schools.

These will have a welcome and meaningful impact on the lives of **all** citizens, including LGBT Jamaicans, their family, friends and allies.

J-FLAG stands ready to support the government in demonstrating its commitments to protect and promote the human rights of all Jamaicans, regardless of their socio-economic status, sexual orientation, health status, disability, work, and political and religious persuasions.

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