



SIAH-200601

June 1, 2020

Mr. Luigi Di Maio
Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy

Dear Foreign Minister Di Maio,

Allow me at the outset to extend my thoughts to Italy over the severe challenges your country has faced as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and to wish you well in overcoming the continuing threats posed by the disease.

In relation to the above, it was with regret that I read your recent remark quoted widely in the media that you will not have Italy treated as a “leper colony” in reference to other countries closing their borders to citizens of your country as a result of COVID-19.

As I had occasion to write to then Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini in 2018, references that draw on deeply ingrained negative stereotypes of leprosy to make a point about something else only serve to reinforce discrimination against people affected by the disease and their families.

As you will be aware, leprosy is now a curable disease and there is no cause to isolate someone with leprosy. Notwithstanding, persons affected by the disease continue to face stigma and discrimination in various parts of the world as a result of misinformation and long-held beliefs, often exacerbated by unfortunate remarks reported in newspapers and on television and social media.

At a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has placed enormous demands on countries, health systems and individual citizens, it is important more than ever that we treat each other with dignity and respect and avoid stigmatizing references that can sow misunderstanding.

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Permit me to draw your attention to the December 2010 UN General Assembly Resolution adopted unanimously by 193 countries, including Italy, approving principles and guidelines for the elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members.

While I am sure that it was not your intention in any way to reinforce stigma against leprosy or cause anguish to people affected by the disease, I fear this may have been the consequence and so I have written to you today to humbly request you that you refrain from using leprosy as a negative metaphor in future.

Respectfully yours,



Yohei Sasakawa

Chairman, The Nippon Foundation

WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination

Japanese Government's Goodwill Ambassador for the Human Rights of Persons Affected by Leprosy