

Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members

REFERENCE:
AL ITA 2/2020

10 June 2020

Excellency,

I have the honour to address you in my capacity as Special Rapporteur on the elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 35/9.

In this connection, I would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information I have received concerning the **negative stereotyping of persons affected by leprosy made by the Italian Foreign Minister in his social media account on 30 May 2020**.

According to the information received:

The Italian Foreign Minister, Mr. Luigi Di Maio, has been quoted widely as calling on other nations to not "treat Italy as a leper colony due to coronavirus". His Facebook posting went viral and several papers printed the story under title "*Italy isn't a leper colony, Italians are not lepers – Di Maio*" and "*Don't treat Italy as a leper colony due to coronavirus, says minister*". An Open Letter to Minister Di Maio was issued jointly by 18 leprosy organisations and groups as well as many individual affected by leprosy. However, his Facebook posting remains unchanged, containing the discriminatory expression against persons affected by leprosy. As of today, his Facebook posting in question has been "liked" by more than 22,000 individuals and shared by more than 2,570 individuals.

In 2018, the Foreign Minister has also used "leprosy" as a metaphor in political debates. I have issued a public statement on that matter, urging the political leaders to stop the use of such expressions and references to leprosy ("*France's Macron and Italy's deputy PM urged to stop misuse of 'leprosy' in political exchanges*", <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23317&LangID=E>).

Without prejudging the accuracy of the information received, concern is expressed regarding the negative stereotyping of persons affected by leprosy made by the Italian Foreign Minister in his social media account. I believe that this discriminatory remarks against persons affected by leprosy was not the objective of the Minister's statement, yet in effect it has had a negative impact on them not only domestically but also globally. Using leprosy as a negative metaphor leads to wrongful stereotyping that fuels public

stigma and impairs the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by persons affected and their families.

The Minister's comparison between COVID19 and leprosy is factually incorrect and deeply unhelpful. Unlike Covid-19 with its extremely high infection rate, leprosy is a mildly infectious disease that 95% of the world population is naturally immune to and any leprosy patient who has undergone multidrug therapy treatment for 72 hours is no longer contagious. According to the WHO, more than 200,000 persons are diagnosed with leprosy every year across the world and a high number of individuals affected by leprosy still remain undiagnosed and untreated despite the free supply of multidrug therapy by the WHO since 1995. By comparing leprosy with Covid-19, Minister Di Maio is perpetuating the idea at the root of leprosy related discrimination: that leprosy is very contagious and a person affected needs to be isolated and excluded by society. It is such stigmatization and negative social attitudes that continue to hinder people from being diagnosed and treated, as well as from fully enjoying their fundamental human rights.

Persons affected by leprosy and their family members are entitled to all rights and freedoms enshrined in international human rights instruments. Their enjoyment of human rights must be fulfilled under the principles of dignity, equality and non-discrimination.

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the **Annex on Reference to international human rights law** attached to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

As a UN member State and an important role-player in the international community, Italy has an obligations and commitments under the UN Principles and Guidelines for the Elimination of Discrimination against Persons affected by Leprosy and their Family members (A/HRC/15/30), endorsed in 2010 at the General Assembly. The UN Principles and Guidelines makes clear that the use of discriminatory language including the derogatory use of the term "leper" or its equivalent in any language and dialect, is prohibited in line with the international human rights standards. Furthermore, stereotyping and stigmatization of members of protected groups has been the subject of expressions of concern and recommendations by the UN human rights mechanisms. In their General Recommendation no. 35 on hate speech, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination re-emphasised the principles of respect and the avoidance of stereotyping. I am concerned that most of new leprosy cases from Italy are from foreigners and that they might be intimidated by such negative comments on leprosy by the political leader. According to the WHO data on leprosy, Italy had five new foreign born leprosy cases in 2018.

As it is my responsibility, under the mandate provided to me by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to my attention, I would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide information on steps taken to remedy the discriminatory language used by Minister Di Maio, to prohibit the use of such negative

language and to respond to concerned voices raised by the leprosy communities.

2. Please provide information and comments which your authorities have taken and/or envisage to take in order to eliminate discrimination and stereotypes against persons affected by leprosy. In particular, please indicate administrative, political and legal measures taken to comply with relevant international human rights standards, including the Principles and Guidelines.
3. Please provide detailed information on policies and plans of action that the Government has taken, or is considering to take, in order to raise awareness throughout society and to foster respect for the rights and dignity of persons affected by leprosy as well as to encourage the media to portray persons affected by leprosy with dignified images and terminology.

I would appreciate receiving a response within 60 days. Passed this delay, this communication and any response received from your Excellency's Government will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#). They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, I urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

Alice Cruz

Special Rapporteur on the elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members

Annex

Reference to international human rights law

Persons affected by leprosy and their family members are entitled to all rights and freedoms enshrined in international human rights instruments. The enjoyment of human rights by persons affected by leprosy and their family members must be fulfilled under the principles of dignity, equality and non-discrimination. In connection with above alleged facts and concerns, I would like to refer your Excellency's Government to the main legal obligations arising from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) adopted and ratified by Italy on 15 Sep 1978, 15 Sep 1978, 05 Jan 1976 and 15 May 2009, as some of the international human rights instruments that protect persons affected by leprosy and their family members.

In addition, Italy has an obligations and commitments under the UN Principles and Guidelines for the Elimination of Discrimination against Persons affected by Leprosy and their Family members (A/HRC/15/30), endorsed in 2010 at the General Assembly. The UN Principles and Guidelines makes clear that the use of discriminatory language including the derogatory use of the term “leper” or its equivalent in any language and dialect, is prohibited in line with the international human rights standards. Furthermore, stereotyping and stigmatization of members of protected groups has been the subject of expressions of concern and recommendations by the UN human rights mechanisms. In their General Recommendation no. 35 on hate speech, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination re-emphasised the principles of respect and the avoidance of stereotyping.