

YOHEI SASAKAWA

c/o The Nippon Foundation
1-2-2 AKASAKA MINATO-KU TOKYO 107-8404 JAPAN
Tel: +81-3-6229-5181 Fax: +81-3-62295180

Having viewed the trailer for your forthcoming feature, *The Pirates! Band of Misfits*, I have found that the portrayal of leprosy therein is egregiously incorrect. As WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination and Japanese Government Goodwill Ambassador for the Human Rights of People Affected by Leprosy I must express my outrage at the following two points and formally request that they be amended or removed from the movie.

1. In the scene in question, the word "leper boat" is used. The term "leper" has been ruled as discriminatory by the United Nations Human Rights Council, and its use has been proscribed in the "Principles and Guidelines" accompanying the UN resolution on the issue.

2. In the same scene, an arm drops off a person who is portrayed as having leprosy. Not only is this factually inaccurate, but by reinforcing misconceptions about the disease – and worse, by playing the disease for laughs – there is a danger that you are perpetuating the discrimination that many people affected by leprosy still face.

Today leprosy is a curable disease. Treatment is available free of charge to all who need it through drugs distributed by the World Health Organization. Early diagnosis and prompt treatment are the key to a full recovery. Yet around the world, people affected by leprosy, even including the families of those who have contracted the disease and those who have been cured, continue to be marginalized because of the age-old stigma attached to leprosy. This stops them coming forward for treatment and can result in permanent disability. Indeed, there are an estimated 3 million people living with leprosy-related disability today. Erroneous characterizations of leprosy such as the scene in *The Pirates!* trailer invariably have tragic consequences for the lives of those affected by the disease.

In the last three decades, some 16 million people have been cured of leprosy around the world. The number of new cases is declining and is now under 250,000 a year. Nonetheless, stigma and discrimination remain deep-rooted – so much so that the UN General Assembly saw fit to adopt a Resolution in December 2010, approved by 192 countries, specifically to address this issue.

At the end of this month, the seventh annual Global Appeal to End Stigma and Discrimination against People Affected by Leprosy is to be launched in Sao Paulo, Brazil. It is being endorsed by the World Medical Association and its national member associations, who are committed to counteracting prejudice toward leprosy and to disseminating correct information about the disease. It is not an easy task to change the image of leprosy, and it is a task made all the harder through regrettable depictions of the disease – especially when they feature in a family film that will be seen by a worldwide audience.

Therefore, I ask for your understanding of our efforts to end the stigmatization of people affected by leprosy – not only leprosy patients themselves but also those cured of the disease and even their family members – and I call on you to take all necessary measures such as modifying or deleting the scene in question. Furthermore, if in the film itself there are other inappropriate expressions or episodes concerning leprosy, I request that you take the same course of action.

Yours faithfully

Yohei Sasakawa
WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination
Japanese Government Goodwill Ambassador for the Human Rights of People Affected by Leprosy