

Using 'leprosy' metaphors in political rhetoric 'fuels public stigma' and discrimination: UN rights expert

Recent incidents where high-level politicians have used the word 'leprosy' in discriminatory remarks against rivals only contributes to harmful stereotypes surrounding the disease.

That's the view expressed by a [UN human rights expert](#) who is calling for the word to be abandoned as a metaphor "for all that is loathsome."

Alice Cruz pointed out that in the past two months alone, both the Portuguese Prime Minister, António Costa, and Bangladesh's Minister of Shipping, Shajahan Khan, have used the word 'leprosy' when referring to opposition parties.

"The historical symbolism of leprosy as being negative is deeply ingrained and triggers use of the word unthinkingly," said Ms. Cruz, who is the UN Special Rapporteur on the elimination of discrimination against people with the disease.

The historical symbolism of leprosy as being negative is deeply ingrained – *UN expert Alice Cruz*

"Using it as a metaphor leads to wrongful stereotyping that fuels public stigma, everyday discrimination, and impairs the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by persons affected and their families."

Leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, is caused by a bacteria called *Mycobacterium leprae* and mainly affects the skin. It is transmitted when someone who has the disease coughs or sneezes.

Though leprosy is curable if detected early and treated, it can cause progressive and permanent damage if left untreated, leading to disfigurement, blindness and chronic wounds.

While leprosy has existed since ancient times, Ms. Cruz explained that it is "not a disease of the past." Rather, it is still present today and deeply associated with social inequities affecting millions worldwide.

She added that public stigma is among the barriers to early diagnosis, as are other "discriminatory factors" such as gender, age, race and increased vulnerability due to disability, social exclusion or even migration.

"The enforcement of equality and non-discrimination for people affected will not be possible without addressing harmful stereotypes and wrongful

stereotyping," she said.