



# International Medical Health Organization I.M.H.O.

A non-political, not-for-profit, humanitarian organization

A 501(C)(3) registered charity in USA

September 21, 2009

Dear Mr. Weerawansa,

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(California)

We write, with great sadness, concerning an article that appeared in the 20 September 2009 issue of the Sunday Observer entitled "IMHO and the LTTE Connection," by Hassina Leelarathna of Los Angeles, California. The article's central thesis, which it presents with no evidence to support its view, is that the IMHO raises funds for the LTTE's violence. The author implies this repeatedly, asserting without evidence that the IMHO is "allied with the LTTE," has "direct and indirect ties" to the LTTE, and that it has a "direct relationship" with the LTTE.

These claims are false. IMHO has no alliance or ties with the LTTE or any other group that engages in violence. The IMHO does not now and has never supported violence of any kind. Nor has any IMHO project or funding ever been diverted to support any kind of violence, either directly or indirectly.

On the contrary, the IMHO is a humanitarian organization whose sole aim is to improve the health and nutrition of civilians caught in conflict and natural disaster. It was founded by concerned Americans and Sri Lankans living in the United States, most of whom are doctors. The group has always focused on the victims of the conflict in Sri Lanka because of the serious healthcare crisis in the conflict zone. Since its inception, IMHO has always been strictly non-political, as its mission is only humanitarian.

The IMHO has pursued its humanitarian mission in strict compliance with the anti-terrorism laws of both the United States and Sri Lanka. The group disclosed to the Internal Revenue Service of the United States, at the time of its founding, that it would be working in the conflict zone of Sri Lanka, including in territory then held by the LTTE. It has also ensured that every dollar spent is accounted for through the use of an independent financial auditing firm, which has audited the group's accounts every year since 2005. In addition, an attorney knowledgeable in the anti-terrorism laws of the United States reviews and approves every IMHO project to ensure compliance with those laws. Most important, whenever the IMHO has considered funding projects in the Sri Lankan conflict zone, it has taken great pains to work only with employees of the Government of Sri Lanka or non-governmental agencies registered with the Government of Sri Lanka. In several cases the group has worked directly with government hospitals, with staff under the Ministry of Health, and with groups that form part of the Consortium for Humanitarian Agencies.

The author mentions none of these facts, no doubt because they cannot be reconciled with the central thesis of her article. Why would the United

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States government allow the IMHO to continue to function if in fact it is well-known to be an arm of the LTTE, which is a designated terrorist organization in the United States? The author never says. Indeed, if her allegations were plausible, one would have expected her to refer them to the Internal Revenue Service in the United States, given that both the author and the IMHO are based there.

Instead, she relies heavily on innuendo concerning the activities of some of IMHO's Board members to support the false claim that IMHO is allied with the LTTE. While many of the claims she makes concerning these Board members are false or misleading, the more central problem with her argument is that they prove nothing about the IMHO itself. IMHO is proud of the fact that its Board members come from diverse backgrounds, have varying political beliefs, and bring a variety of skills to their work for the organization. It should surprise no one that some of the people who have dedicated themselves to the IMHO's humanitarian mission also engage in political activism, including activism concerning Sri Lanka.

However, the author erroneously concludes from this fact that the IMHO *as an organization* also has a political agenda. This kind of guilt-by-association has no basis in fact. On the contrary, all Board members adhere strictly to IMHO's non-political mission in their work for the organization, and the author presents no evidence to even suggest otherwise.

If the author had contacted any of IMHO's staff or Board members prior to publication, she would have learned all of this information. That she failed to do so, and that the article consequently contains none of this information, is surely a sign that the author has approached the topic with her own agenda. In other writing on the same topic, she has made other blatantly false statements (including the completely false claim that the IMHO is "all-Tamil," when in fact the Board, staff, and volunteers include people from a myriad of ethnic backgrounds). Sadly, it appears that her attack fits a pattern of attacks against those who attempt to protect the lives of innocent people caught in armed conflict, particularly in Sri Lanka.

That your paper has chosen to publish such blatantly biased writing is extremely unfortunate, not only because it undermines the quality of your newspaper's journalism, but also because it makes it harder for the IMHO to continue to do its extremely important work. The IMHO works not only in the north and east of Sri Lanka, but also in southern Sri Lanka, Burma, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United States, and other places where victims of war and natural disaster need assistance.

For these reasons, we sincerely hope that you will print this letter, retract the story from 15 September, 2009, and in the future ensure that journalists writing about the IMHO in your paper engage in basic practices concerning journalistic ethics – including asking for comments from interested parties and checking important facts. Had such rudimentary practices been followed by the author here, we would venture to guess that this story would never have been written.

Sincerely,

Board of Directors  
International Medical Health Organization (IMHO)

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