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Outrage over tobacco funds for Red Cross



The entrance to the Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva - before current transformation work (Keystone) from the manufacturer of Camel and Winston cigarettes.

Campaigners are fuming over donations made by Japanese Tobacco International (JTI) to the Geneva-based International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum and to the Geneva Red Cross. Red Cross officials, however, downplay the controversy.

According to the Tribune de Genève newspaper, the European Respiratory Society, the World Heart Federation, local anti-smoking associations Cipret and OxyRomandie and representatives from Lausanne University have sent letters of protest to the museum urging them to end a partnership with JTI.

They claim that one of the fundamental principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – to protect life and health and respect human beings - has been violated by accepting an undisclosed financial donation

"[Red Cross founder] Henri Dunant must be turning in his grave," said Cipret President Jean-Luc Forni.

Since their first letter sent to the museum in July, a reference to the partnership has reportedly disappeared from the JTI website.

The firm however confirmed to Tribune de Genève that the "JTI Foundation has supported the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum on several occasions in 2011".

Museum Director Roger Mayou confirmed that the support consisted of a donation, "among dozens of others", towards the extension and transformation of the building, which is located next to the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva.

The museum closed last year for major building work – SFr13million budget funded by private donors and Geneva city authorities - and is due to re-open in 2013.

Mayou said he was surprised by the campaigners' reactions and added that the foundation board was considering what steps to take regarding the letters. The partnership with JTI continues for the moment, however.

" [Red Cross founder] Henri Dunant must be turning in his grave. "
Cipret President Jean-Luc Forni

Red Cross guidelines

OxyRomandie President Pascal Diethelm declared that, in line with World Health Organization (WHO) accords signed by Switzerland, sponsorship of community or health organisations by the tobacco industry should be banned.

JTI's support is also contrary to internal health-related Red Cross guidelines governing partnerships with the private sector, he added.

Article 23 of Red Cross regulations concerning the use of the Red Cross or Red Crescent emblems by national societies states that any ties with firms whose activities include the sale or manufacture of weapons, alcohol, tobacco, or products that are clearly identified as harmful to the environment should be avoided.

The Geneva Red Cross has also reportedly received donations from JTI. Geneva Red Cross President Guy Mettan felt the donations it received from JTI were valid, however. He did not understand why a "perfectly legitimate firm" was being discriminated against.

"After all it's not an arms manufacturer," he told the Tribune de Genève. "This is all a poor trial. The Red Cross doesn't make any distinction between its donors. All humans are equal; that's exactly what Henri Dunant said."

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