

# THE SPECIAL AMBASSADOR'S JOURNAL, 2002

*Starting with this first newsletter, we will be presenting excerpts from the special ambassador's 2002 journal. As WHO special ambassador, Yohei Sasakawa spent a considerable amount of time in countries where leprosy is classed as endemic by the World Health Organization. In those countries, he met with political leaders to emphasize the importance of the elimination campaign, held press conferences to ensure that correct information about the disease reaches a wide segment of the population, and visited the frontlines: the health centers, hospitals and villages where the elimination movement is being pursued with vigor. When he went to countries where leprosy has already been eliminated, he visited villages and rehabilitation facilities to meet former patients and their caretakers.*

*In 2002, he traveled to such countries as Brazil, Malaysia, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and India. This issue's entry covers a trip to Brazil, where the second meeting of GAEL was held.*

## **January 2002, Brazil Meeting with President Henrique Cardoso — “NGO Involvement is Crucial”**



Yohei Sasakawa (left) with President Cardoso of Brazil

My first leprosy-related activity of the year 2002 took place in Brazil when I participated in the Second GAEL Meeting, held in Brasilia from January 29 to 31. Taking advantage of this opportunity, I met with then President Fernando Henrique Cardoso on January 30 and asked his excellency to give leprosy elimination a high priority among the country's many public-health issues. President Cardoso expressed his willingness and a strong commitment to promote leprosy elimination as an important part of his government's agenda. He evaluated the concept of GAEL highly, placing

crucial importance on the collaboration between different stakeholders, such as those in GAEL, in the fight for public health. He particularly pointed out the important role NGOs play, citing the successes of such groups on the issue of HIV/AIDS in Brazil. I left feeling that the health of Brazil was in exceedingly capable hands.

## **Elimination in Rural Amazon Villages: The Important Role of Local Medical Staff**



With the family of a patient in Amazon

I also had an opportunity to visit the Amazon State capital of Manaus and the nearby city of Manacapuru, both of which have a high incidence of leprosy. The Health Bureau of Manaus kindly arranged for us to visit clinics and nearby villages where leprosy patients live. We traveled with local paramedics to small villages on the banks of the Amazon River, where we visited the homes of people undergoing treatment. I was very impressed with these paramedics' dedication to detection, medical care, record keeping and skilled operational management. I was deeply touched by the warm care given by family members. Contrary to what has often been the case in the past, in that region the patients are not abandoned but protected and cared for by loved ones. This degree of warmth would not have been possible without a successful campaign of information dissemination.

I returned to Japan with two firm beliefs: that the dedication of these field workers, working silently but efficiently on the periphery, is vital if we are to achieve elimination, and that strong and loving families are essential to social rehabilitation. □

*(to be continued)*