

FOR THE ELIMINATION OF LEPROSY

A MESSAGE FROM THE SPECIAL AMBASSADOR

Leprosy and Human Rights

We are striving for the elimination of leprosy by the year 2005. "Elimination" here is defined as a prevalence rate of less than one per ten thousand inhabitants of every country in the world.

However, this number really means nothing more than the elimination of leprosy as a *public health* problem — a medical issue. This does not mean that our fight against leprosy ends when we have achieved elimination.

From ancient times, leprosy has been associated with strong social stigma. Leprosy patients have been forced into isolation from the rest of society, and have even been abandoned by their own families — often treated as though they did not even exist. I have long thought that discrimination against those affected with leprosy should be regarded as a human rights issue.

Today there are around 600,000 patients every year in the world who need treatment for leprosy. However, if you include those who have completed medical treatment and their families, there are tens of millions of people who are still suffering from unnecessary discrimination and resulting injustices. They are often denied equal opportunities for education, marriage and employment, which are open to people who have not been touched by the disease.

On July 2nd, I visited Geneva and was able to discuss this issue for the first time with Acting United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Bertrand Ramcharan. Mr. Ramcharan was in full agreement that the discrimination these people have to face is a human rights issue. He then agreed to cooperate with us in an effort to bring about improvement of the situation. I believe that this is a significant and historical event. I am pleased that we have finally been able to make an international appeal for recognition of the pain and suffering felt by the people affected with leprosy and their families. Finally, the world is opening up to this problem as a human rights issue.

Unless this issue is resolved, our fight will never end. Even after we have reached our goal in 2005, our journey will continue until the day that leprosy is completely eliminated, both medically and socially.



Yohei Sasakawa
WHO Special Ambassador
President, The Nippon Foundation

Leprosy is Curable.

Free Treatment is Available.

Social Discrimination has no Place.

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