



UNITED NATIONS

Press Release

3 July 2003

Acting High Commissioner and Head of Nippon Foundation Discuss Discrimination against People with Leprosy

Acting United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Bertrand Ramcharan met on 2 July with the Nippon Foundation to discuss the problem of discrimination against people with leprosy and their families.

Mr. Ramcharan and Nippon Foundation President Yohei Sasakawa concurred that the problem of discrimination and social stigmatization suffered by those affected by leprosy should be addressed from a human rights perspective. The acting High Commissioner said it would be important to bring the issue to the attention of the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health and to other relevant UN human rights organs.

Mr. Ramcharan and Mr. Sasakawa both expressed interest in a continuing dialogue and cooperation and agreed on the need to increase awareness of issues related to discrimination against people affected by leprosy. Mr. Ramcharan further suggested that the Sub-Commission on the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights, which will meet from 28 July to 15 August in Geneva, could provide an opportunity to organize a briefing on the human rights issues faced by those affected by leprosy. The Nippon Foundation and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights agreed on their interest in collaborating — along with the World Health Organization — in such awareness-raising and advocacy efforts.

Newly Appointed WHO Director General — “Within My Tenure”

On July 1st, Yohei Sasakawa, President of The Nippon Foundation and WHO Special Ambassador for Elimination of Leprosy met with newly appointed WHO Director General Dr. J.W. Lee to discuss ongoing work towards the elimination of leprosy. They reiterated their commitment to the goal of eliminating leprosy by the year 2005 and discussed the importance of India — stating that success in India is vital to the overall effort. “Although increased anti-leprosy activity there has been discouraging to some, who ask ‘With so many new cases, how can we achieve elimination by 2005?’ we must not hesitate in our activities, but rather push on towards the goal,” stated Dr. Lee.

Mr. Sasakawa stressed the importance of being actively involved “on-site,” stating plans to visit India, Nepal, Madagascar, and Angola, and emphasizing the importance of India and of tackling the issue in India state by state rather than viewing India as simply one area.

Dr. Lee mentioned plans to refocus the program closer to the areas most affected, and stressed the importance of working together to successfully meet the goal of leprosy elimination by 2005.



Dr. J.W. Lee and Yohei Sasakawa (right)

| HUMAN STORIES |

Modifying Ancient Lore

Legends and beliefs from ancient times have a tendency to perpetuate themselves. In the case of leprosy, overcoming the beliefs of centuries requires our best efforts in both education and treatment. Even today, living in the 21st century, we still have many battles ahead of us. We now focus on detecting the first signs of the disease and then treating it with MDT to stop the disease at a very early stage. Nevertheless, we must not forget those with more advanced cases in order to fully grasp the scope of the task that lies before us. With this in mind, the following story from India is worth reading and empathizing with. From unfortunate endings to happy beginnings, the story illustrates the vital role education plays in combating the disease.

— Editor

The Asra village council was meeting yet again. Council members sat on either side of the headman. Across from them stood Dhelabai and her family. The village watchman began the meeting stating that Dhelabai had leprosy. Neither she nor her family denied this. The headman ordered her out of the village, her husband acquiesced, and in ten minutes the meeting was over.

Thus expelled, the woman next sought refuge in her parents’ village, but her deformities brought on abuse there too. She tried to beg, but people ignored her.

Deprived of her family and rejected by both villages, Dhelabai hanged herself from a babool tree.

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