



*A Street in Toamasina Province, Madagascar*

## REPORT ON AFRICA

# Leprosy Elimination Progress in the WHO Africa Region

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## Trends and the Current Situation

In the WHO Africa Region (composed of 46 countries with more than 700 million inhabitants), substantial progress has been made toward eliminating leprosy since the 1990s. All member states have realized that elimination is tied in with poverty alleviation and in each country a high political commitment is evident in the high priority placed on the elimination of this stigmatizing disease.

In 1994, when the ministers of health adopted resolution AFR/RC44/R5 to eliminate leprosy as a public health problem on a regional level, 42 countries were highly endemic. More than two-thirds of them had prevalence rates of more than two cases per 10,000 inhabitants.

Today, only nine countries have a prevalence rate of more than one in 10,000 and only three have worryingly high rates. All other countries have made dramatic reductions.

With the intensification of leprosy elimination activities, more countries are beginning to reveal their true conditions. Tanzania is one of these countries. The leprosy programs in the Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone and Liberia have been disrupted by war and social conflicts, leading to fluctuating prevalence rates. The magnitude of leprosy prevalence in DR Congo and the Central African Republic is still not fully known despite the low prevalence rates they have been showing for years.

**Prevalence Trends Since 1996** — Each country in the region has organized national leprosy elimination programs with corresponding systems to collect information on leprosy cases. In 1999, the average

prevalence rate for the region was 1/10,000. Seven countries had prevalence rates of more than 2/10,000 and were classified as priority countries by the Global Alliance for the Elimination of Leprosy.

In 2002, three years after the 1999 global evaluation of the elimination effort, only three countries were still considered highly endemic and at risk of not reaching the elimination goal.

**Detection Trends Since 1996** — In the early nineties, WHO recommended that all countries implement special actions to detect and treat the backlog of hidden leprosy cases throughout the region. The resulting interventions were successful. But an important aspect was often overlooked: the stigma of the disease. Since 1999, “social mobilization activities” have been developed and encouraged by WHO, aiming toward better knowledge of the disease and a reduction of its negative cultural and social impact. This initiative has assisted the implementation of special projects and facilitated case detection activities.

## The Current Regional Situation

The current regional situation is very encouraging. In spite of many emerging and re-emerging diseases and various complications, countries have maintained leprosy elimination as a national priority.

The number of countries that have reached the elimination goal has risen from 32 in 2002 to 37. Nevertheless, most of these 37 countries are looking for further support toward strengthening leprosy elimination efforts — a post-elimination program based on integration, early case detection, treatment and integrated surveillance of the disease.