

Making the Case for Human Rights

Yohei Sasakawa puts leprosy on the agenda at the U.N. Commission on Human Rights.

At the end of March, WHO Goodwill Ambassador and Nippon Foundation President Yohei Sasakawa led a delegation to Geneva to take part in the 60th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights held from March 15 to April 23, 2004. The issue he brought before the commission was the discrimination in societies around the world toward those affected by leprosy and the need for guidelines to recognize and protect their human rights.

Comprising a rotating membership of 53 states, the commission meets each spring for six weeks at the U.N.'s Geneva headquarters. Over 3,000 delegates from member and observer states and NGOs attend the annual session, during which the commission adopts about 100 resolutions and decisions pertaining to human rights.

The UNCHR is assisted in its work by the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, a number of working groups, and a network of individual experts, representatives and rapporteurs mandated to report to it on specific issues.

Sasakawa's bid to get leprosy taken up as a human rights issue at the commission started last July, when he met Acting High Commissioner Bertrand Ramcharan in Geneva. At Ramcharan's suggestion, he organized a panel briefing for members of the sub-commission on August 5,

2003, on the social and human aspects of leprosy.

With the cooperation of Professor Paul Hunt, special rapporteur for the right to health, Sasakawa returned to Geneva this spring to present an exhibition on people affected by leprosy, host a panel discussion with participants from Japan, Brazil, India and the United States, and present an oral statement to the commission.

Behind the initiative is the fact that while progress is being made toward eliminating

The Commission on Human Rights meets every spring in Geneva.



TAKING AIM AT DISCRIMINATION

Panelists share their thoughts on the urgent need to tackle stigma.

A panel discussion organized by the Nippon Foundation on the sidelines of the 60th session of the Commission on Human Rights provided moving testimony as to why the social aspects of leprosy must be addressed.

Chaired by Professor Kenzo Kiikuni, Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation,

WHO's Helena Nygren-Krug



the seven-member panel included two persons affected by leprosy.

Dr. P.K.Gopal, president, IDEA, noted how fear and unscientific beliefs among lay people about the nature of the disease resulted in the stigmatization of those with leprosy that persists today. The presence of a leprosy-affected person affects the whole family, he said, making it hard for a son or daughter to get married, and for the family to find accommodation. He also pointed out that discriminatory legislation remains on the statute books in India, and that some hotels and temples still display signs refusing entry to those with the disease.

Zilda Maria Borges, IDEA-MORHAN Brazil, said that the end of leprosy will not come with the elimination of the disease, but when those who have been affected by it are recognized as having the same human rights as everyone else in society. She cited a couple of encounters with women cured of leprosy, one of

whom felt 'dead inside', and the other who contemplated killing herself because she despaired of her future. When such suffering exists, said Borges, we must not delay in working to achieve human rights for all.

Anwei Law, international coordinator, IDEA, described society's response to those with leprosy as "the most persistent and pervasive form of social injustice that society has forced on its fellow human beings." People were segregated because they were deemed to be undesirable, expendable and inferior, she said, and even today, the historical tradition of discrimination and seclusion continues. "There are young people living in leprosy hospitals even though they are completely cured," she said. "We should be ashamed."

Professor Paul Hunt, UNCHR special rapporteur on the right to health, noted that the right to health was a fundamental human right found in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human