

leprosy as a public health problem by the end of 2005, social discrimination remains a deep-seated problem.

Millions live in isolation. They have no homes to return to. They are dead to their families.

Although national isolation policies have been largely abandoned and laws changed, and although leprosy is now curable, in some cases the social reaction to the disease remains so severe that even those who have been completely cured are unable to take their place in society.

Given only three minutes to make his presentation, Yohei Sasakawa ran through the list of problems faced by those affected by the disease.

“Mr. Chairman, discrimination is still rampant. Those cured of leprosy still can’t marry. They can’t get work. They can’t go to school. They are still treated as outcasts. ... Many still think leprosy is dangerous or hereditary. Many still see it as a divine punishment. And so millions live in isolation. They have no homes to return to. They are dead to their families.”

Afterward, many people came forward to request copies of the oral statement. It was encouraging to see the level of interest, given the

fact that this was just one of dozens of presentations made by NGOs on the day.

Elsewhere, there was interest, too, in the photo exhibit sponsored by The Nippon Foundation showing the plight of those facing leprosy-related discrimination.

During his stay in Geneva, Sasakawa had meetings with Acting High Commissioner Ramcharan, Special Rapporteur Hunt, and with officials of IDEA, an international network of leprosy-rights groups that is striving to bring dignity to the lives of those affected by this discrimination.

He also met with Helena Nygren-Krug, WHO health and human rights advisor, who took part in the panel discussion and stated WHO’s eagerness to tackle leprosy from a human rights perspective.

Ambassador Sasakawa plans to continue participating in commission meetings in the future, working to see that the commission adopts a resolution that calls on governments to tackle the issue of discrimination. In particular, he wants to see the commission create guidelines for governments, NGOs and other stakeholders that will give impetus to efforts to end discrimination.

In that regard, the visit to Geneva this spring was extremely valuable and will hopefully serve as an important stepping stone on the way to seeing discrimination of the affected individuals and their families officially recognized as a human rights issue. ■

Rights. Discrimination on grounds of health status, former health status or a family member’s health status is unlawful, he said. The state is obliged to take measures to ensure its officials do not discriminate against those affected by leprosy, to make reasonable efforts to ensure that third parties don’t, and to educate the public.

Yohei Sasakawa, The Nippon Foundation, spoke of his “frustration, horror and disappointment” as he discovered that many of those cured of the disease were unable to take their place in society because of the discrimination they faced. Political leaders and the media need to be made more aware of the problem, he said, and efforts must be made to improve education.

Helena Nygren-Krug, WHO health and human rights advisor, commented that WHO is turning its attention to the social as well as the medical aspects of leprosy, now that WHO Director-General Jong-wook Lee has made human rights a



Yohei Sasakawa (far right) with (from left) P.K.Gopal, Acting High Commissioner for Human Rights Bertrand Ramcharan, Zilda Maria Borges and Anwei Law.

priority area. “Stigma and discrimination can be one of the most serious impediments in successfully tackling a disease,” she said.

From the floor, a member of a Nigerian human rights NGO suggested that the cause of people affected by leprosy would be helped by

collaborating with mainstream human rights organizations, and she offered to raise awareness of the issue in her own country. It was a positive note on which to end the discussion, and showed what stands to be achieved if more people are made aware of the issue and decide to act. ■