

# From the Mediterranean to the Himalayas

WHO Goodwill Ambassador Yohei Sasakawa visited two very different nations recently: Malta, where leprosy is considered to have been eradicated, and Nepal, one of the world's six major leprosy-endemic countries.

## MALTA

At the end of March, I had the opportunity to visit Malta, an island republic of some 400,000 people located south of Sicily, more or less in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. As multidrug therapy (MDT) becomes the standard approach to treating leprosy throughout the world, Malta has succeeded in eradicating the disease through what might be called Malta-style MDT. I was very interested to learn more about this and find out where Malta stands today vis-à-vis leprosy.

One of the earliest recorded cases of leprosy on Malta dates back to 1629, but the disease is thought to have existed much earlier. At one point, more than 200 patients were listed, which by today's WHO elimination yardstick of less than one case per 10,000 people would indicate a very high prevalence rate given the population at the time. In 1918, there were 4.72 patients per 10,000, or 4.7 times today's elimination standard.

Malta was part of the British Empire for many years, and in common with other British colonies, it was thought necessary to isolate and confine those with leprosy. Accordingly, a leprosarium was constructed near the site of the "poor house" on Malta island, based on an 1893 ordinance, and a second leprosarium was built on the island of Gozo in the 1930s.

In 1953, however, the segregation policy was abolished, reflecting both the progress made since the 1940s in the development of drugs for treating leprosy and changing attitudes worldwide. Thereafter, people with leprosy were mainly treated as outpatients, and both leprosaria were closed in the 1970s. The former poor house is now a nursing home for the aged, but nothing remains of the leprosarium.

In 1957, a few years after the switch to

outpatient treatment of leprosy patients, there were 152 patients in a population of 314,369 — still a considerable number. At the time, the only treatment available was dapsone, which had to be administered over a long period; however, because of emerging resistance to dapsone, the search continued for a new form of chemotherapy.

In 1972, Malta initiated a leprosy eradication program. Led by the Ministry of Health, it was supported by the Order of Malta, the German Leprosy Relief Association, and the Research Center Borstel of Germany, which came up with an MDT called Isoprodian-RMP combining rifampicin, isoniazid, prothionamid and dapsone.

Over time, 261 patients were treated with the new therapy, for a period of six months to a maximum of seven years, depending on their symptoms, and all of them were cured. A follow-up survey continued for 27 years until December 1999. Today, about 100 people who once had leprosy are still alive, with the last known case of the disease diagnosed six years ago. Leprosy on Malta is considered eradicated.

I was told that in 1974, when St. Bartholomew Hospital (as the leprosarium on Malta island was later renamed) and Sacred Heart Hospital (the facility on Gozo) were both closed, 22 individuals who had no homes to return to were transferred to the site of a former army barracks on Malta called Tal-Farha Estate. There, they were provided with accommodation and land for cultivation, and given pensions and access to medical treatment. But when I sought out the location, the only traces to be seen were the words Tal-Farha written on the bottom of a stone wall.

Malta has done away with leprosy. I applaud this success, but we must never forget the history of human suffering that preceded its elimination.

## LEPROSY LEXICON

### ● MDT

Multidrug therapy (MDT) is the standard treatment for leprosy. A combination of two to three drugs — dapsone, rifampicin, and clofazimine — MDT kills the bacillus that causes leprosy and interrupts transmission of the disease. Treatment takes six to 12 months and there is virtually no recurrence.

(Left) Malta's old quarantine station, or lazaretto, where new arrivals, including those with leprosy, were detained; Tal-Farha Estate: these walls are all that remain.

