

NEPAL

In April, I finally realized a long-held wish to visit Nepal. This is one of the six major countries where the leprosy prevalence rate is rather high, and with this trip I have now been to all six in my capacity as WHO ambassador.

Nepal has a population of some 24.8 million. According to health ministry figures as of mid March 2004, the leprosy prevalence rate was 2.4 people per 10,000, down from 3.4 per 10,000 as of February 2003. Given that the prevalence rate was 70 per 10,000 about 15 years ago, Nepal is making steady progress toward elimination. However, although 31 out of the country's 75 districts have now achieved the elimination target, in the mountainous west and in the southeastern *Terai* (lowlands) bordering on India, there are places where the prevalence rate exceeds five per 10,000, so still more effort is needed if the elimination target is to be reached by the end of 2005.

During my visit, I met with then-Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa and Health Minister Bhekh Bahadur Thapa in the capital, Kathmandu. I requested that the government make all efforts for leprosy elimination from an awareness as well as a medical standpoint. They replied that the government had made elimination a high priority both on the policy side and in practice, and were working toward elimination by the end of 2005.

In Nepal, leprosy education is now part of the school curriculum.

The prime minister said leprosy education was now part of the school curriculum and that the government was determined to spread information about the disease throughout the country by making greater use of the media. For my part, I said that in order to turn leprosy



Outside the Khokana settlement leprosarium

elimination into a major social movement, it was necessary to involve a broad spectrum of NGOs, as well as forge even closer ties with NGOs that specialize in leprosy, and both the prime minister and health minister agreed with me about this.

I also had discussions with Health Secretary Lock Man Singh Karki, Director General Dr. B.D. Chataut, and Public Health and Policy Advisor to the Health Ministry Dr. Rita Thapa. They gave me their commitment that they were working toward the elimination target by involving government, NGOs and the private sector in activities at every level, training human resources, and fostering a social movement all over the country from village to national level.

Dr. Bimala Ojha, director of the Leprosy Control Division, said that Information, Education and Communication (IEC) programs were being strongly pushed, and that leprosy featured in >>

Overview of Khokana settlement, home to some 200 recovered individuals and their families.

