

Bhutan's Success

WHO Goodwill Ambassador Yohei Sasakawa's travels take him to Jordan, India and the "land of the thunder dragon," Bhutan, which achieved elimination in 1997.

JORDAN

When I visited Jordan in May, I contacted the local WHO office and the Jordanian Ministry of Health ahead of time, and asked them to look into the leprosy situation for me. I learned from this several things: leprosy was eliminated from the kingdom long ago; there is virtually no evidence that it was endemic; and nobody knows anything about the disease today. There was a hospital on the west bank of the River Jordan, but this was destroyed in 1967 at the time of the Six-Day War. There may be some hidden cases, but since leprosy does not exist in government records, there is no way of finding out. Given that leprosy is described in the Old Testament and Jordan is not far from Christ's birthplace, it's hard to comprehend that no records of the disease exist today.

INDIA

On June 4 and 5, I was in New Delhi to attend a National Consultation Workshop on Advocacy Strategies for the Elimination of Leprosy. Held under the auspices of the India-headquartered International Leprosy Union, the workshop focused particularly on what role the media can play in leprosy elimination, and was attended by government, NGO, and media representatives, as well as people cured of the disease. I used the occasion to suggest to those present that we 1) come up with a concrete plan on how to use the media, 2) consider putting cured persons at the center of elimination activities, and 3) promote not just medical integration but social integration. I urged them to treat discrimination against cured persons and their families as a human rights problem, and reported that I am working to have the UN Commission on Human Rights take up the issue.

As there is a separate report on the Delhi proceedings elsewhere in this issue, let me here just bring up two more important points.

First, I was delighted to hear Dr. G.P. Dhillon, the deputy director general (leprosy) for India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, say that the prevalence rate in India as of March 31, 2004, had dropped to 2.44 cases per 10,000 population. Of course, this is at the national level. There are still two states where the prevalence rate is above

5 per 10,000, and nine more states where it is between 2 and 5, so the need for still greater efforts at elimination remains unchanged. To make progress toward elimination and remove stigma, widespread PR activities will be required to see that correct information about the disease reaches everyone. This is not just a task for organizations and individuals specializing in leprosy; it needs to involve people and organizations in every sector of society. Again, it is not only a question of medical integration, but social integration as well. The role the media can play in disseminating the right messages about leprosy is enormous — and how to involve the media in doing this was, of course, one of the main themes of this gathering.

In response to my remarks, Dr. S.D. Gokhale, the ILU president, proposed involving cured persons in a systematic and organized way as spokespersons to bring about an attitudinal change regarding the disease and so work toward elimination and the end of discrimination. Nothing carries more weight than the statements of cured persons. Until now, they have led a hidden existence. It is very important that we now ask them to assume a social role in making efforts for elimination and ending discrimination, and I look forward to seeing real progress in this area.



Dr. S.D. Gokhale

BHUTAN

From India I traveled on to the Kingdom of Bhutan. Bhutan is about the same size as Switzerland, and has a population of about 700,000. A mountainous country, it nestles in the Himalayas between China and India and is known by its people as "the land of the thunder dragon." About 80% of the population work the land. The national religion is Tibetan Buddhism.

Bhutan began fighting leprosy in the 1950s, mainly under the patronage of the royal family, and it wasn't until the 1960s that the government began elimination activities in earnest. In 1962, the royal family invited The Leprosy Mission to Bhutan, following which the government and the NGO joined forces to tackle the disease. Thanks to the effectiveness of MDT, which was introduced to Bhutan in 1982, the country achieved elimination in 1997 and by 2003 the number of cases had dropped from 4,000 in 1966 to just 18.