

FOR THE Elimination OF Leprosy

- Leprosy is curable
- Free treatment is available
- Social discrimination has no place



Partners in the fight against leprosy stand shoulder to shoulder at a reception hosted by Yohei Sasakawa in Brasilia in July 2004.

A MESSAGE FROM THE GOODWILL AMBASSADOR

Can Statistics Be Trusted?

In July, I visited Brazil for the first time in two years, and was shocked to discover that elimination activities had made almost no progress. In 2002, when I met then-President Cardozo, he gave his strong commitment to elimination. Unfortunately, I discovered on this visit that administration and health ministry activities have been at a standstill, and official statistics contain errors. For the past six years, the prevalence rate has remained virtually unchanged, and even the health ministry acknowledges that the figures can't be trusted. "We were asleep," a senior health ministry official admitted.

Is this kind of problem limited to Brazil, I wonder? Are the statistics we rely on to be believed? Are there not operational factors such as re-registration and wrong diagnosis that distort the numbers? I'd like to ask other endemic countries to go back and reexamine the figures.

Now, under the firm leadership of President Luis Inacio "Lula" da Silva, who came to power last year, the Brazilian administration, the health ministry, state and municipal officials are united in their efforts to take up the elimination battle

anew. NGOs such as MORHAN, which operates "Telehansen," a nationwide toll-free telephone counseling service, and which uses popular singers and actresses in its campaigns, also play an important role. With the government and NGOs cooperating closely together, I am reassured that elimination activities will now make progress.

When I met him, President Lula expressed his strong determination to "make up for lost time." Indeed, immediately after taking office, he visited leprosy sanatoria, and affirmed his intention to see the disease eliminated.

With only 14 months until the deadline for leprosy elimination, we cannot — must not — waste any time. We need to re-verify the figures, get an accurate picture of the challenge we face, and help those countries that have yet to achieve the target use the remaining time effectively and efficiently.

The battle to eliminate leprosy is turning into a battle against time, and we must not lose.

— Yohei Sasakawa, WHO Goodwill Ambassador

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