

# MORHAN's Vital Contribution

For 23 years, MORHAN has been fighting to eliminate leprosy from Brazil, as National Coordinator Artur Custodio Moreira de Sousa relates.

"Before MORHAN, we walked with our heads bowed. Today, we hold our heads up because we recognize we are part of society." This assertion by Cristiano Torres, MORHAN coordinator for Para State, Brazil, highlights the important role of MORHAN (Reintegration Movement for People Affected by Hansen's Disease) in working to eliminate Hansen's disease and the prejudice that surrounds it.

Established on 6 June 1981 by the charismatic Francisco Nunes "Bacurau," who himself had overcome the disease, MORHAN was part of the explosion in social movements fighting for democracy and human rights that emerged in Brazil in the 1980s. Its history is thus closely bound up with people working to advance the cause of human rights and public health in Brazil.

It was one of the first advocacy groups in the world formed by people affected by Hansen's disease, and its founders believed that only through mobilizing volunteers who had not had the disease could the disease be eliminated and prejudice overcome. Today those volunteers include everyone from ordinary citizens to some of Brazil's best-known celebrities, among them singers Ney Matogrosso and Targino Gondim, actor Ney Latorraca, actresses Solange Couto, Karla Karenina and Elke Maravilha, clothing designer Lino Vilaventura and painter Siron Franco.

Brazil's first cases of Hansen's disease occurred some 500 years ago among Europeans and slaves from Africa. As in other countries, the subsequent history of those affected was marked by pain, suffering, prejudice, isolation, ruined families and shattered lives.

Brazil didn't officially eliminate the practice of isolating patients until 1962 (although not every state followed through). Then, in 1981, the World Health Organization officially recommended that

endemic countries adopt multidrug therapy. This prompted social organizations to begin campaigning against the stigma and prejudice associated with the term leprosy. The health ministry decreed that the term *hanseníase* (Hansen's disease) be used instead, and eventually this became law after considerable pressure from MORHAN.

## Key Objectives

The main goal of MORHAN is to inform society that Hansen's disease can be treated and cured, and, with hard work, completely eliminated. To achieve this, MORHAN has set the following targets:

- Help cure, rehabilitate and socially reintegrate people affected by the disease
- Work to eliminate the prejudice they face at home, at work and in the community
- Ensure that those affected by Hansen's disease can freely exercise their rights as citizens
- Transform old hospital-colonies where patients were isolated from society and their families into places where they are treated with respect, educated about their disease and given access to cultural and recreational facilities that help build up their self-esteem and improve their quality of life.

These goals are justified by the high incidence of Hansen's disease in Brazil, where there were 79,908 registered cases at the start of 2004, or a prevalence rate (PR) of 4.52 per 10,000 people. In 2003, 49,026 cases were registered, or a new case detection rate of 2.77/10,000.



(from left) Yohei Sasakawa, singer Ney Matogrosso and MORHAN's Artur Custodio



MORHAN T-shirt:  
"Together we can eliminate Hansen's disease."

In the fight to reduce the PR, MORHAN has been campaigning to prevent and control the spread of the disease, both in conjunction with the health ministry and through MORHAN's regional branches. Today MORHAN is represented in 24 of Brazil's 27 states and gives support to more than 100 communities. It also works together