

# At the Frontlines of Elimination

India has the most cases of leprosy and Africa has the most endemic nations. Yohei Sasakawa travels to both regions as the elimination deadline nears.

## INDIA (JANUARY 26-29)

In January I was in Delhi to attend a one-day conference on leprosy elimination organized by Dr. S.D. Gokhale, chairman of the International Leprosy Union (ILU). Less a gathering of specialists than a pep rally, it was held with the support of ILU, IDEA, WHO and Gandhi Smitri.

The timing and location of the January 27 conference had special significance. January 30 marks the anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. Given Gandhi's association with leprosy work, it is also commemorated as leprosy day in India, and various elimination activities are conducted around this time of year. In addition, the venue for the event was the garden of Gandhi Smitri, formerly Birla House, where Gandhi spent his last days and was assassinated in 1948.

It was Gandhi's dream to see leprosy eliminated from India, and the efforts we make this year will be critical to achieving this. This conference, which drew heavily on Gandhi's memory, was thus important in forging a sense of solidarity as we push toward this goal.

Among those attending were former president of India, Hon. Shri R. Venkataraman; WHO representative to India, Dr. S. J. Habayeb; ILU president, Dr. S. K. Noordeen; and psychologist and actor, Dr. Mohan Agashe.

In my remarks, I repeated the three messages I deliver everywhere I go, that leprosy is curable, treatment is free, and social discrimination has no

place. According to a recent survey, 50% of Indians polled are now aware of these messages. To ensure 100% awareness will require the cooperation of all sectors of society, including the media and in particular people affected by leprosy themselves. We may be walking the final mile of eliminating leprosy as a medical problem, but we are just taking the first steps toward eliminating the disease of social discrimination.

In that sense, the most important achievement of this conference was to secure the participation of people affected by leprosy from all over India in campaigning to change society's image of the disease and encourage those who need it to seek treatment. In my opinion, there are no more effective spokespersons.

There were nearly 130 persons affected by leprosy at the event. Of these, 32 were selected as Lokdoots, or special communicators, whose mission it will be to tell their countrymen the true facts about leprosy. They were chosen for being financially independent, socially accepted and active in a variety of fields. They show by their own example that people can be cured of leprosy and lead normal, productive lives.

I believe each of them has an enormous contribution to make in eliminating the disease and rooting out discrimination. I look forward to supporting this initiative and seeing it grow.

While in New Delhi, I also paid a courtesy call on the Delhi National Capital Territory health



Shri S.P. Aggarwal, health secretary for Delhi NCT



(From left) Dr. S.D. Gokhale, Shri R. Venkataraman and Yohei Sasakawa enjoy a few words with Shakuntala Devi, a newly appointed Lokdoot, or special communicator, from Madhya Pradesh. IDEA's Dr. Gopal is in the background.