



Yohei Sasakawa speaks at World Leprosy Day as Madagascar's prime minister looks on.

MDT Man makes his presence felt during the World Leprosy Day festivities in Tulear.

Madagascar is the world's fourth largest island, with a population of some 17 million. Seeing it from the air, one can appreciate the physical challenges the terrain presents in the way of reaching remote rural populations. Added to this, heavy rains can cut off communities during the cyclone season. Nonetheless, the WHO, government, NGOs and all concerned are making real efforts to combat the disease. As a measure of progress, when I visited Madagascar in September 2003, the prevalence rate stood at 4 per 10,000. Now it is down to 2.93.

As I learned in Johannesburg, the main challenges facing Madagascar include improving the quality of patient diagnosis by peripheral health workers, improving patient follow-up to make sure that only genuine leprosy patients are on the register, and social mobilization.

Promoting awareness of leprosy is an important part of the strategy, so I was happy to participate in the World Leprosy Day event held in Tulear, a city of 50,00-60,000 in the southwest of the country, where the PR stands at around 4/10,000. Held in a carnival-like atmosphere, the day-long event included music, dance, puppetry and film and was a good platform from which to deliver important messages about the disease.

Both the prime minister and the health minister took part in the ceremony, and their

commitment will certainly be necessary to keep elimination moving in the right direction. I told the people of Madagascar they had my full support, and I would come back and celebrate with them when the country achieved the target.

After Tulear, I visited three towns on the southeast coast of the island, Mananjary, Manakara and Farafangana, all with high prevalence rates, where I met with health workers and visited local hospitals and health facilities.

Basic health centers are at the frontline of the health care system, and each caters for an average 5,000-6,000 people. All told, there are around 2,500 such centers in the country, and the people who work there play a vital role educating about the disease and spotting new cases. But they are not just dealing with leprosy but all health issues, so their job is extremely demanding.

I found that not every health center keeps complete records of patients or MDT. In particular, in some places, MDT isn't getting from the regional hospital to the basic health center, while in others there is a surplus of MDT. Getting this right is essential to the elimination strategy.

Wherever I go, I like to talk with patients, and was able to do so at several locations, including Tulear regional hospital, the Marovhay leprosy and TB center, and St. Vincent Hospital in Farafangana.

Speaking with some of them, I was struck by their solemn expressions. Even though they have been assured that leprosy is curable, they appeared to be suffering the effects of social discrimination.

Madagascar is clearly walking the final mile toward elimination. But the work to eliminate deep-rooted stigma and discrimination is perhaps only just beginning. The three messages I tell to people around the world are all-important, and the third message, that social discrimination has no place, must not be forgotten once elimination is achieved. Driving that message home might be more difficult than treating the disease itself. ■