



Vice-President Zahidi
Ngoma



Health Minister Dr. Emile
Bongeli Yeikelo Ya Ato

implications that has for the logistics of leprosy elimination. Unfortunately, the areas where there are the most cases of leprosy are also those affected by the ongoing militia violence and unrest, making it harder to achieve effective health coverage.

Although it won't be possible for the DR Congo to achieve elimination this year, Dr. J.N. Mputu Luengu B, the national leprosy program manager, told me that the country intends to reach the target by the end of 2007. With the support of WHO and other partners, as well as political commitment at the highest levels, I have every hope it will achieve this goal.

I was fortunate to be able to spend some time with Health Minister Dr. Emile Bongeli Yeikelo Ya Ato and also called on Vice-President Zahidi Ngoma as well as the chief cabinet secretary. All voiced their support for elimination and promised to work for an end to discrimination. In particular, the health minister said he wanted to sit down with health officials, the WHO, and NGOs and map out a strategy for making more effective use of NGO support.

For the second half of my stay, I traveled to Katanga Province in the southeast of the country. At 3.94/10,000, Katanga has the highest PR of any of the DR Congo's 11 provinces, and contributes one-third of the country's leprosy cases.

After calling on the provincial governor in the capital, Lubumbashi, I took part in a press conference attended by some 50 local journalists. Speaking before the media, the health minister said that two of his relatives once had leprosy, which I felt was a brave admission, given the level of stigma that still exists.

From Lubumbashi we drove north about 120 kilometers to Kapolowe, where there is a leprosy hospital, rehabilitation center and a village of recovered persons. What with patients, cured persons, hospital staff, dignitaries and area residents, there must have been several hundred people gathered for the occasion.

I was taken on a tour of the wards and of the settlement, where I saw recovered persons engaged in making sandals and baskets. The patients each make three or four baskets a day, for which they earn the equivalent of \$1. Given that average annual income in the DR Congo is about \$100, this struck me as a good wage.

I was told that there is a region of the DR Congo called Sasakawa. It is also a person's name meaning "one who gives light." It's a name I want to live up to as I encourage all concerned in their efforts to help the DR Congo see its way to achieving elimination.

TIMOR-LESTE (September 4-7)

At the beginning of September I made a brief visit to Timor-Leste. The country gained its independence from Indonesia in 2002. With outside help, especially from the UN, East Timor is slowly finding its feet, but faces many challenges.

The insurgency that preceded its secession from Indonesia completely destroyed its infrastructure, and the health sector was no exception. Public health services are gradually being rebuilt, with the health ministry at the center of these efforts.

At present, for a population of some 1 million people, there are only about 30 doctors. There is also a dearth of hospitals and health centers.

Against this backdrop, leprosy elimination has made remarkable progress, thanks to the tremendous efforts of the WHO country representative, Dr. Alex Andjaparidze.

According to the most up to date figures, 625 new patients have been registered in the past two years, and the current prevalence rate is 3.9/10,000. Over half — or 388 — live in an enclave called Oecusse.



Recovered persons in Oecusse enjoy festivities to celebrate successful completion of their treatment.

Traveling by UN helicopter, I flew one-and-a-half hours from the capital, Dili, to Oecusse. There, I took part in a ceremony to congratulate more than 200 people on the successful completion of their treatment. They ranged in age from children not yet in their teens to the elderly. I was delighted to see there was little evidence of deformity among them.

Both President Kay Rala Xanana Gusmao and Health Minister Dr. Rui Maria de Araujo are committed to elimination. Given the small number of patients, and the fact they occupy one designated area, I believe a concentrated effort will see the elimination target achieved in due course. ■