

Putting Empowerment on the Agenda

Groundbreaking meeting issues 'Delhi Declaration' affirming dignity and rights of persons affected by leprosy.

India's first ever national conference of persons affected by leprosy was held in New Delhi on December 19, 2005.

Under the theme of "Integration and Empowerment," the landmark conference drew some 600 delegates — among them representatives from India's nearly 700 leprosy colonies — as well as senior government ministers, health workers and activists.

More than 11 million Indians have been cured of leprosy since the mid 1980s, and while less than 60,000 people are believed to live in these self-settled colonies, social integration and economic advancement remain far off for many.

"We have won the medical battle against leprosy thanks to multidrug therapy, but the war against social stigma and irrational discrimination is still to be won," said WHO Goodwill Ambassador Yohei Sasakawa at the opening of the conference.

Chaired by IDEA India President Dr. P.K. Gopal, who described the gathering as "a historic day for persons affected by leprosy," the conference heard speeches from Union Minister for Justice and Social Empowerment Meira Kumar, Union Minister for Policy Implementation Oscar Fernandes, Leprosy Elimination Alliance President Dr. S.K. Noordeen, International Leprosy Union Chairman Dr. S.D. Gokhale, and Federation of Leprosy Organizations President Dr. Brahm

Dutt, among others.

For many of the colony representatives, it was their first experience to participate in a national conference. It provided them with the opportunity to link up with other persons affected by leprosy from all over India, and inspired the hope that by joining forces they could work together to build a better future. The bursts of applause that regularly punctuated the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry Golden Jubilee Hall were testimony to the feelings of empowerment



Delegates came from all over India for the landmark meeting.

DELHI DECLARATION OF DIGNITY New Delhi, India, December 19, 2005

Whereas, the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, recognizes "the inherent dignity" and "the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" as the foundation for freedom, justice and peace in the world;

We, the participants in the National Conference on Integration and Empowerment of Persons Affected by Leprosy, held in Delhi, India, on December 19, 2005, do hereby join together to affirm our dignity and our right to be involved in decisions that affect our lives and our future.

Therefore, as partners working together to eliminate the stigma associated with leprosy and the destructive effects that it has on people's right to live their lives with dignity, we, the participants in this National

Conference, do hereby resolve that the following recommendations be adopted in order to promote quality of life, freedom from degrading treatment, and each individual's most basic human rights.

1. Every effort should be made by government agencies, non-governmental organizations and the people themselves to ensure that individuals affected by leprosy are not discriminated against in any way in their daily life, including the areas of education, employment, housing, public transportation, and the availability of medical services.
2. The government should be encouraged to actively promote the human rights of individuals affected by leprosy, and actively prevent violations of these most basic rights.
3. All discriminatory laws, including the law that facilitates divorce due to leprosy, should be repealed.
4. The use of dignified terminology is essential to eliminating the stigma and appropriate language should be used to address people affected by leprosy. Derogatory terms such as "leper," "maharogi," "kodi," etc., should never be used.
5. Opportunities should be provided for individuals and organizations made up of persons affected by leprosy to work in partnership with government agencies and non-governmental organizations to develop activities and programs.
6. Individuals affected by leprosy should be nominated in the State and National Commissions as members under the Persons with