

Speakers Vow to Push Ahead

Partners, health ministers pledge their ongoing commitment at Geneva meeting.

A Global Leprosy Forum held on May 26 during the World Health Assembly in Geneva brought together key partners and health ministers from several nations, who all renewed their determination to build on progress in fighting the disease.

The forum was chaired by Dr. S.K. Noordeen of the Leprosy Elimination Alliance, with opening remarks delivered by Dr. Margaret Chan, WHO assistant director-general for communicable diseases and the director-general's representative for pandemic influenza.

Speaking on behalf of the late Dr. J.W. Lee, Dr. Chan noted the success achieved by the elimination strategy, but said this was not a time to relax or be complacent. "As with any control program, the final phase is the most difficult phase. We need to put in that extra effort." She also called for greater attention to be paid to the physical, social and economic rehabilitation of persons affected by leprosy and to human rights violations.

Yohei Sasakawa said he spent a third of each year overseas in his capacity as WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination. The three main purposes of his trips were to talk with politicians to make sure that leprosy is a high priority, to solicit the cooperation of mass media and to provide encouragement to those working in the field. In particular, he said, cooperation from mass media is extremely important because it lets the general public know that the disease is curable, free drugs are available and there is no place for discrimination.

Seeking to make clear his stance on the elimination issue, Sasakawa said, "One very important point I would like to stress — the use of the word 'elimination' of leprosy. I regard it as a milestone along the road to eradication. But I am aware that there are some who may misunderstand this and feel that if elimination is achieved, then this movement will have been completed. I will continue to visit various countries, especially those that have yet to

achieve the elimination goal, and I will emphasize that elimination is an important step toward eradication."

Newly reappointed as goodwill ambassador, he noted that his new mandate includes a reference to tackling the social aspects of leprosy, and said this would give a boost to his efforts to get the UN Human Rights Council to adopt a resolution on stigma and discrimination. "I am hopeful that a resolution will be adopted and guidelines issued to each member nation, and that this will lead to an integrated approach covering both medical and social aspects of leprosy."

INTERMEDIATE GOAL

Addressing his country's recent success in achieving elimination at the national level, India's health minister Dr. Anbumani Ramadoss said this was only an intermediate goal, adding he was confident that India could achieve eradication in the next 10 to 15 years. Dr. Filomeno Fortes of Angola's health ministry said that many challenges remain despite achieving elimination, and that leprosy would continue to be a public health priority for Angola.

Congratulating India and Angola on their success, Dr. Jarbas Barbosa of Brazil's health ministry said Brazil was making up for lost time, and would join in marking the elimination milestone this year or next. Representing the health ministry of Tanzania, a country close to achieving elimination, Dr. Gabriel Upunda admitted that more had to be done to educate not only the general community but health workers too, to ensure that persons with leprosy were accepted and given appropriate support. Meanwhile, Dr. Kyaw Myint, Myanmar's health minister, said his country was emphasizing efforts to sustain elimination and minimize the health, social and economic consequences of the disease.

NEW STRATEGY

Rigo Peeters, president of the International



Panelists take part in the Global Leprosy Forum in Geneva on May 26.