

From Rio to the Amazon

A recent visit to Brazil confirms that good progress is being made in the fight against leprosy, even in remote parts of the country.

BRAZIL (JUNE 10-18)

Brazil is one of a handful of countries that have yet to achieve the WHO's goal of eliminating leprosy as a public health problem. However, under the personal direction of President Luiz Inacio Lula Da Silva, the government, the WHO and NGOs are actively working together to reach this milestone.

On my most recent visit to Brazil in June, the prevalence rate stood at 1.48 and I was told there were some 18,000 registered cases. A measure of progress is that in just two years, the reported number of new cases has dropped by 24.27%, down from 49,300 in 2004 to 38,400 in 2005. According to the federal government, Brazil will reach the elimination goal at the national level by the end of the current fiscal year or at the beginning of the next.

The first stop on my journey was Rio de Janeiro, where I visited the Hospital Frei Antonio, the oldest leprosy facility in Brazil. It was originally a monastery founded by the Jesuits in 1752 and was active as a leprosy hospital up until 20 years ago. Today only four elderly residents remain. One of them entered the hospital as a girl of seven and has lived there more than 80 years. When she was admitted, her father planted a sapling in the hospital grounds. Today it has grown into a large tree, and she told me that looking at it is a daily pleasure.

Next I visited the Tavares de Macedo colony in the suburbs of Rio, which was established by the federal government in the 1930s. About 250 people affected by leprosy live here. However, the non-leprosy affected population is much larger, attracted by subsidized rents and utilities.

Most of the arrangements for my visit to Brazil were made by MORHAN, a grassroots movement



A warm Brazilian welcome at Tavares de Macedo

headquartered in Rio for the reintegration of people affected by leprosy. MORHAN has six regional coordinators and 100 centers across 24 of Brazil's 27 states, and works closely with the Brazil government. It sits on the 48-member National Health Council. Half of the council's members are drawn from civic society, and it plays a key role in shaping the federal government's health policies.

One of MORHAN's major initiatives is a toll-free telephone counseling service called Telehansen. For the past two years, The Nippon Foundation has supported its activities. Staffed by volunteers, including people affected by leprosy, the 12 phone lines Telehansen operates receive an average of 7,000 calls a year related to leprosy. Subjects range from medical questions to queries about human rights and social issues.

Telehansen receives an average of 7,000 calls a year related to leprosy.

From Rio de Janeiro I traveled to the capital, Brasilia. Among those I met were Brazil's health minister, Dr. Jose Agenor Alvares da Silva, Dr. Rosa Castalia, in charge of the leprosy control program, Rogerio Sotille, head of the special secretariat for human rights, and Senator Tiao Viana, vice president of Brazil's Senate.

Between them they assured me that the elimination goal would be achieved and that human rights questions were being addressed. Concerning the rehabilitation of people affected by leprosy, the federal government has admitted that the past policy of isolating them was a mistake, and is now working to provide appropriate social support, possibly by offering benefits in the form a pension. This would certainly be a remarkable development if it happened.

Next, I traveled 2,300 kilometers northeast of Brasilia to the town of Fortaleza in Ceara State. There I paid a courtesy call on Dr. Jurandir Frutuoso, the state health secretary. At present, the state PR is 1.76, and Ceara is increasing the number of health personnel as it makes steady progress toward the elimination goal. Dr. Frutuoso also gave me some insights into political



Dr. Jose Agenor



Rogerio Sotille