

A Call to Action

Manila appeal represents renewed bid to end stigma and discrimination

Some 300 people gathered at the Philippine International Convention Center in Manila on January 29 for a morning of speeches, songs and messages of endorsement for the Global Appeal 2007 to end stigma and discrimination against people affected by leprosy.

The appeal, signed by 16 people affected by leprosy from 13 countries together with WHO Goodwill Ambassador Yohei Sasakawa, follows a first Global Appeal launched a year earlier in New Delhi and endorsed by world leaders including former US President Jimmy Carter and the Dalai Lama.

As Goodwill Ambassador Sasakawa stood at her side, 11-year-old Ma. Kristina Sacdalan read out the manifesto, which includes the words: "Denying the inherent human rights of anyone on the basis of disease is indefensible. Discrimination can never be justified." Ma. Kristina once had leprosy but was cured with multidrug therapy.

The appeal is designed to raise awareness of the discrimination still faced by people affected by leprosy and their families and the devastating consequences for those thus stigmatized.

"Leprosy is not like other diseases," Sasakawa told the gathering. "People can be completely cured, yet society does not accept them. This is a result of misunderstandings about the disease and wrong knowledge. Society is at fault." He went on to praise his co-signatories for confronting the discrimination they have faced and joining him in putting their names to the appeal.

Dr. P.K. Gopal, a leader of the National Forum of People Affected by Leprosy in India and president of IDEA International, who was one of several signatories present, said it was "a great day for all of us" and felt that Global Appeal 2007 was "even more important" than last year's event given the presence of so many stakeholders and the involvement of leprosy-affected persons on an equal footing.

Karen S. Gomes-Dumpit, director of the National Commission on Human Rights of the

Philippines, said the appeal would play an indispensable role in advocacy and policy-making. "People affected by leprosy do not ask for more rights, they only ask for equal rights," she said.

"They are not asking for more rights, they are asking for equal rights."

NATIONAL FORUM

The previous day, policy makers, partners and persons affected by leprosy came together for a one-day national forum to draft a Philippine Declaration in support of the Global Appeal.

Groups representing three different regions of the Philippines discussed their experiences relating to stigma and discrimination, formulated a consensus on the issues they wished to see addressed, and identified the interventions they wanted to pursue to reduce stigma and discrimination.

The forum also heard reports from affected persons from India, Indonesia and China on the situation in those countries and efforts at empowerment through networking.

Among the demands contained in the declaration are "access to all public establishments and facilities and equal opportunities to utilize services necessary to sustain the basic needs of life" and "to be treated and identified as normal individuals."

Health Secretary Francisco Duque III presented a copy of the Philippine Declaration to Goodwill Ambassador Sasakawa at the Global Appeal 2007 launch ceremony the following day.

PIONEERING ROLE

Chosen by Sasakawa as the host country for the Global Appeal event, the Philippines has a long association with efforts to control leprosy. The country successfully piloted the use of multidrug therapy, eliminating the disease as a public health problem in 1998, and was once home to the world's largest leprosy colony, Culion, which marked its transformation from an island of despair to an island of hope during its centennial celebrations in 2006.

Currently the Philippines sees around 3,000 new cases a year, and leprosy is a priority disease in the health ministry's disease-free zone initiative.

"How we respond to leprosy tells us a lot about who we are and the society we now live in," Health Secretary Duque said. ■

VOICES

From this day on
I'll proudly wear my name
I vow to do my share
To make this world humane
No venom in my tongue
No hatred in my heart
I'll sing of peace and love
From this day on
— *From This Day On*
(excerpt)

composed by Mr. Jess
Santiago for Global
Appeal 2007



The Department of Health choir perform *From This Day On* for Global Appeal 2007.