

Visits to Laos and Nepal

Calling at a leprosy village north of Vientiane; attending a conference in Kathmandu

LAOS (NOVEMBER 23)

On a recent visit to Laos, I had the opportunity to visit Ban Somsanouk, a village about 130 kilometers north of the capital, Vientiane. It is one of several villages in Laos where people affected by leprosy live, but the only one where they are drawn from different ethnic groups. Ban Somsanouk has a population of 1,136. Of these, 165 are affected persons, of whom 109 have disabilities.

While I got the impression that the affected persons live among the rest of the villagers, I understand the community is not entirely free from stigma. From what I was told, some people still think that leprosy is divine retribution and that the disease originates from within. Also, many of the leprosy-affected persons are severely disabled, and clearly at a disadvantage compared to their able-bodied neighbors.

When I arrived, people turned out to give me a warm welcome. I told them that leprosy is curable, it is not God's punishment and that discrimination is fundamentally wrong. I also urged them to spread correct knowledge about the disease. Leprosy may no longer be a public health problem in Laos, but from a human rights perspective, it is clear that more needs to be done.



The Ban Somsanouk welcoming committee

NEPAL (NOVEMBER 26-DECEMBER 2)

My visit to Nepal took place against the backdrop of momentous political developments following the signing of a peace accord between the government and Maoist rebels signaling an end to a decade of conflict. Not unrelated, perhaps, Nepal is one of five major countries that have yet to pass the WHO's elimination milestone of reducing prevalence of leprosy to less than 1 case per 10,000 population at the national level.

At present, PR stands at 1.65 and officials



Taking part in the IDEA Nepal 4th General Assembly

estimate that elimination could be achieved this year. One of my reasons for visiting at this time was to attend a WHO regional seminar on leprosy elimination designed to review progress and encourage greater efforts.

The day before, I traveled south of the capital to Anandaban Leprosy Hospital. Founded in 1957 by The Leprosy Mission International, it is the biggest leprosy hospital in the country and the main leprosy referral hospital for Nepal's Central Development Region. Over the years, the hospital has helped thousands of people affected by leprosy and more recently has also been providing primary health care services to the local community as the number of leprosy cases lessens.

The hospital's reputation for treating people with leprosy extends far and wide, and patients come from India, Tibet and Bhutan, as well as from Nepal. Sometimes they are referred to Anandaban at the border. On the day I visited, there were 69 leprosy in-patients, 9 general patients and 4 children or relatives accompanying the in-patients.

Through offering outpatient services and operating a general ward, Anandaban Hospital is also helping to lessen stigma. Over time, it seems, the surrounding population is coming to see leprosy as just another disease.

Another reason for visiting Anandaban was to attend the opening ceremony of the IDEA Nepal 4th General Assembly, which was being held in a packed meeting hall in the hospital grounds. IDEA, which stands for Integration, Dignity and Economic Advancement, has chapters in many countries, and is a self-help organization working for the social empowerment of people affected by leprosy. Dr. P.K. Gopal, the president of IDEA