



Panel Display in Palais des Nations, Geneva

SPECIAL REPORT

Leprosy and Human Rights

Meeting at the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, 55th session



Participants at the Geneva Meeting (left to right): Arturo C. Cunanan, Jr., Magdalena Ramirez, Kenzo Kiikuni, Birke Nigatu, P. K. Gopal, Yohei Sasakawa, and Jose Ramirez, Jr.

For too long, people affected with leprosy have suffered social discrimination, yet their voices were not heard and the problem has not been officially dealt with as a human rights issue. As reported in the last issue, Yohei Sasakawa met with Acting UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Bertrand Ramcharan on July 2nd in Geneva to discuss the problem of discrimination against people affected with leprosy. Mr. Ramcharan agreed that the issue must be dealt with as a human rights issue. At his suggestion, a briefing meeting was organized by The Nippon Foundation and Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation at the 55th Session of the UN Human Rights Sub-Commission on August 4, 2003. This was the very first meeting in the history of the UN Human Rights Commission to take up the issue of leprosy as a human rights issue.

During the period of the Sub-Commission meetings, an exhibit was arranged with 18 photo panels displaying messages from leprosy affected people calling for better awareness of the strong social stigma they continue to experience worldwide.

The briefing was chaired by Dr. Kenzo Kiikuni, Chairperson, Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation. Presentations were made by Yohei Sasakawa; Arturo C. Cunanan, Jr., Head, Culion Leprosy Control Project, Culion Sanitarium, Culion, Philippines; Birke Nigatu, Chairperson, Ethiopian National Association of Ex-leprosy Patients; Jose

Ramirez, Jr., Advanced Clinical Practitioner, Department Director for Network and Transportation, IDEA (International Association for Integration, Dignity, and Economic Advancement), Texas, USA; Magdalena Ramirez, Social Work Program Manager (VA Hospital, Texas); and P. K. Gopal, President, IDEA, India.

Each speaker reported the history of the difficult lives people affected with leprosy have had and the current situation in which there is still strong social discrimination and stigma against them. There were voices of surprise from the audience who, for the first time in their lives, heard about what people affected with leprosy continue to endure.

This was a very significant step forward in the fight for the elimination of leprosy as a human rights issue. This was the first opportunity provided for people affected by leprosy to speak at the UN Human Rights Sub-Commission, and it generated very positive reactions from the people concerned. It was agreed that further efforts need to be continued toward creating more occasions to convey this issue to a world audience.

The following are condensed versions of speeches given at the meeting.



Yohei Sasakawa

We who are working for the elimination of leprosy have set elimination (as a public health problem) by the year 2005 as our target. Since 1985, thanks to the introduction of MDT, well over 100 countries have achieved the elimination goal but there remain about ten countries that still have high prevalence rates. The goal of eliminating leprosy as a public health problem is clearly in sight. Now, however, it is time to seriously consider how we are going to tackle the difficult social issues associated with leprosy; the discrimination that arises from prejudice and social stigma.

Since the dawn of recorded history, there have been