

stigmatization of Hansen's disease.

On our way to Geneva, from Houston, Texas, a woman at the airport asked us what we were carrying in the big box we were taking with us. Jose told her that they were displays on leprosy for the United Nations in Geneva. "Leprosy?" she said, "I thought it was non-existent, and that it was cured a long time ago."

That's the kind of response that is specifically the problem we face today — that the general public thinks that Hansen's disease is non-existent, and therefore dismiss it as not a very important or significant health or human rights issue.



P. K. Gopal

The leprosy started in my body when I was twelve years old. My father took me to a government hospital, but it was not diagnosed. Even if it had been diagnosed, there was no specific cure at that time.

Seven years passed, and when I was studying at college, there was a medical check-up at the college. The doctor diagnosed me as having leprosy. This was a big shock to me and my family. I continued to pursue my studies however, even with physical disabilities. Fortunately, my family loved and supported me, and so I could persevere.

In most cases, people affected with leprosy were abandoned by their families and communities. When there was a leprosy patient in a family, the entire family was socially and economically affected. People refused to marry a woman from that family. When the person had visible deformities, it was very difficult for the family to find a house they could rent to live in. Thus the family was socially boycotted by the community. Husbands could easily abandon their leprosy-afflicted wives, and parents often disowned their children with leprosy. So

the disease played havoc with the social fabric of the families of people with leprosy.

The people who completely lost their social and economic positions, and were driven away to the streets due to leprosy, were forced to beg for a living. These people began to live together in places away from the community and these places were called leprosy colonies or leprosy villages. There are 300 leprosy colonies in India.

Being cured of the disease alone does not restore normal socioeconomic status to those affected. Fear and wrong notions about leprosy still prevail in the minds of people. As a result, discrimination of people affected by leprosy still continues in many ways.

It is necessary to make those affected by leprosy conscious of human rights and to sensitize them to identify the violations, reporting the incidents to concerned authorities in order to solve the problems. □

Ambassador Meetings

Ambassador Yohei Sasakawa met the following people during the month of August 2003:

August 5th — Visit to LEPRO (British Leprosy Relief Association) in Colchester, including meeting with Terry Vasey, President.

August 5th — Visit to the University of Essex to exchange views on leprosy and human rights issues with Professor Paul Hunt, Special Rapporteur for the UN Human Rights Commission.

August 27th — Meeting with ILEP (the International Federation of Anti-Leprosy Associations) Coordinating Bureau, Dominique Martineau-Needham, General Secretary, and Trevor Durston, of the Steering Committee.

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