

Return to India

If the goal of leprosy elimination is to be achieved, then what happens in 2004 will be crucial. Yohei Sasakawa returned to the country with the biggest caseload to attend a key conference designed to accelerate momentum toward this goal. He considers it very significant that it was inaugurated by the president of India.

RAIPUR

My first trip of 2004 was to India, where I attended the National Conference on the Elimination of Leprosy from January 27 to 30. Held in Raipur, state capital of Chhattisgarh, it was sponsored by the International Leprosy Association, the Indian government, the government of Chhattisgarh and major partners in the fight against leprosy.

Speaking at the opening ceremony, India's president, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, said that concerted action would be necessary to achieve elimination by the end of 2005, and demonstrated his clear commitment to this goal. He also stressed the importance of rehabilitating people affected by leprosy, using the term "rehabilitation with compassion." An essential part of this process, he said, would be to promote health education to raise awareness of leprosy and eliminate the stigma associated with the disease. Dr. Kalam left delegates with the thought, "Let my brain remove the pain of the suffering community." With this powerful endorsement from the nation's top leader, I have strong hopes that elimination

activities in India will make rapid progress.

In my own remarks at the opening ceremony, I said that on a journey of 100 miles, after 99 miles we are only half way. This year and 2005 represent the last mile of our journey to achieve elimination. We must proceed with a sense of urgency if we are to complete this journey successfully.

During the conference I had an opportunity to meet with two senior representatives of India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare: Mrs. Rita Teotia, joint secretary, and Dr. G.P.S. Dhillon, the newly appointed deputy director general (leprosy) for General Health Services. I asked them for even more effort from the Indian government, and they told me that a focused action plan for elimination activities in the years 2004 and 2005 was currently being finalized and would be announced very shortly. With India preparing for a general election in April, I imagine there will be some political changes, but I am hoping these won't disrupt the final push for elimination.

I also gave a keynote address offering my thoughts on the situation in India based on several



Mrs. Rita Teotia



Dr. G.P.S. Dhillon

Ambassador Sasakawa walks at the head of an elimination parade passing through the center of Raipur, accompanied by State Health Minister Bandhi at left.



Dr. Raman Singh



Dr. Krishnamurthy Bandhi