

visit, he never thought of leprosy as a problem he needed to associate himself with as president. “Thanks to your visit, I have come to know my country better,” he said. He remarked that there is an expression in Tanzania, “to be avoided like leprosy,” which is often used by politicians in reference to something they want nothing to do with. In other words, it showed the extent to which the disease was feared and disliked in the country. The president promised that he would help to promote correct information about leprosy.

On the return journey to Dar Es Salaam, I stopped off at a care center in Chazi in the Morogoro region. There are about 40 leprosy-affected persons living in this former sanatorium; others have moved into the local community, with GLRA helping to assist in the transition.

Tanzania still faces challenges, particularly in overcoming discrimination and tackling disability. But given the enthusiasm and determination of the minister and others concerned, I’m sure elimination will not be long in coming.

INDIA (May 12-17)



Leaders of Tamil Nadu’s leprosy colonies gather for a monthly meeting at the Villivakkam colony.

In May, I went to Kolkata in West Bengal, and Chennai in Tamil Nadu.

In Kolkata I attended a consultation on Advocacy Strategy and Role of Media in Elimination of Leprosy. Similar meetings have already been held in Delhi, Bihar, Maharashtra, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh. All have been organized by the International Leprosy Union (ILU). The latest meeting was well covered by the media, with some 20 newspapers running stories.

During the conference, I met with West Bengal’s chief minister, Shri Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, and health and family welfare minister, Dr. Surya Kanta Misra. “I assure you

that we are trying our best to eradicate leprosy from our state,” the chief minister told me.

While in Kolkata, I visited a bloc health center in nearby Howrah, and was impressed by a ventriloquist, who conducted a question-and-answer session on leprosy with a monkey dummy.

In Chennai, I took part in a Regional Conference on Leprosy, co-hosted by IDEA India, the Leprosy Elimination Alliance and Hind Kusht Nivaran Sangh (TN) and involving participants from the four southern Indian states of Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

At one point, these four states formed the region with the highest PR in India; now all of them have achieved elimination at the state level. Opening the conference, Tamil Nadu’s health minister, Thiru N. Thalavai Sundaram, said the reduction in the number of registered cases in his state from 800,000 to just 5,300 was no reason to relax, and said elimination activities must be sustained.

The second day focused on discrimination. India still has various laws that are problematic from a human rights perspective, often based on the erroneous premise that leprosy is incurable. Most are said to date back to when the country was part of the British Empire.

One presentation showed how an influential medium such as cinema can propagate false notions, using the example of *Blood Tear*, a 1960s hit film re-released last year. At the end of the film, the main character — something of a playboy — contracts leprosy, and this is presented as divine justice. Needless to say, such a scenario has no basis in fact.

During my stay in Chennai, I traveled to nearby Chengalpattu, home of the Central Leprosy Teaching and Research Institute. I also visited the Paranur Government Leprosy Home, formerly the Leprosy Beggars’ Rehabilitation Home. Once, when Mahatma Gandhi alighted at Chengalpattu station to worship at a nearby temple, leprosy patients streamed to the station to catch a glimpse of him. Gandhi would later remark that he had been going to see God, but instead God came to him.

The last place I visited was Villivakkam Leprosy Colony. My visit coincided with a monthly meeting of leaders of 48 leprosy colonies in Tamil Nadu. I told the 200 people attending, “You recovered persons are the main actors in the fight to eliminate leprosy and eradicate discrimination. It is important that you lead from the front!” ■



(Top) West Bengal Chief Minister Bhattacharjee, (above) Health Minister Sundaram of Tamil Nadu