

# A Journey toward a New Beginning

Vietnam, India and the Philippines were among the destinations on the goodwill ambassador's itinerary in recent months.

## VIETNAM (MARCH 31)

This March found me in Vietnam to mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of Vietnam Maritime University. While there, I used the opportunity to visit a leprosy treatment center in Quacam, about 90 minutes by car from the capital, Hanoi.

I last visited Quacam in 1994. Alongside the center is a colony that is home to around 200 people who have recovered from leprosy and about 100 children. There is also a residential section for the elderly, where I met a 76-year-old woman who had spent the past 52 years in the colony, as well as another elderly woman of 96.

About 50 residents gathered in a hall to greet me. I was struck by how full of life they were, and the general atmosphere of well-being I found there.

The reason for this, I gathered, was the absence of stigma. Stigma existed in the past, but there is almost none today. The elementary school within the leprosy treatment center is also the local village school. Altogether, about 300 children attend. The treatment center also functions as a dermatological hospital. There are about 20 beds for leprosy patients.

I was told that at present there are some 1,200 registered cases of leprosy in Vietnam: 15% have disabilities, and 10% are children.

While in Vietnam, I also had an opportunity to have dinner with Le Tien Thanh, vice minister of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs. I recalled that on my last visit in 1994, I proposed at a WHO gathering to provide a five-year free supply of MDT all over the world, and this was



Residents of a leprosy colony in Quacam

unanimously accepted.

The vice minister said this has played a huge part in changing people's perceptions of leprosy, and led to the disappearance of stigma toward persons affected by the disease. I was also very pleased to hear from him that social rehabilitation is making progress.

## INDIA (APRIL 26-28)

The chief purpose of my third visit to India this year was to lay the groundwork for establishing a foundation for the social rehabilitation of persons affected by leprosy, and to meet with senior figures in the Indian business world to explain the foundation's objectives with a view to raising funds.

My other mission was to deliver a message of congratulations to the Indian government and the WHO upon India's achieving the elimination goal at the end of last year.

I first called on the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to meet with Joint Secretary Rita Teotia and Deputy Director General (Leprosy) Dr. G.P.S. Dhillon. Both told me that the fight was not over, and that India's next goal was subnational elimination. I told them that I hoped to visit the nine states/Union Territories yet to reach the elimination target and encourage them in their efforts.

To discuss the proposed foundation, I called on both the Confederation of Indian Industries and the PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Also, through the good offices of Dr. Rajiv Kumar, the director of the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, one evening I was able to meet up with leading figures in the worlds of business, academia, the media and other fields.

Everyone present showed a good grasp of the issues surrounding leprosy, and expressed their strong support for stamping out discrimination and creating opportunities for social rehabilitation. They also gave their backing to the foundation idea.

Concerning funding, The Nippon Foundation will donate an initial \$10 million but I am hoping that between them India's industrialists will be making a similar contribution. I am now working through an Indian law firm on setting up the foundation, and hope it will begin operations within the next six months.

### Leprosy FACT

- The Philippines achieved elimination of leprosy as a public health problem in 1998.