

# No Slowing Down

The Goodwill Ambassador makes an overnight stop in Timor-Leste before heading to Indonesia for a conference on neglected tropical diseases.

## TIMOR-LESTE (FEBRUARY 11-12)

I first went to Timor-Leste in 2005 and recently made my second visit. The country, which achieved independence from Indonesia in 2002, faces many challenges in building up the infrastructure of a properly functioning state. Following widespread violence in 2006, the situation is far from stable today. On arrival at Dili Airport I was escorted to my hotel by armed UN security guards, who were to accompany me for the duration of my stay.

My first appointment was with the WHO country representative in Timor-Leste, Dr. Alex Andjaparidze, who brought me up to date on the current leprosy situation in this small nation of 857,000 people. In 2003, the leprosy prevalence rate was 7.5/10,000. It has since dropped to 2.4, a big improvement, but far short of the elimination milestone of less than 1 case per 10,000 at the national level.

Between 2003 and 2006, 1,217 new cases were diagnosed. Of these, 888 (73%) have since completed treatment, while 222 are undergoing treatment. Unfortunately, the remaining 107 didn't finish their course of multidrug therapy. This is largely being blamed on the unstable security situation, which prevented leprosy work from being carried out to the hoped-for extent.

Concerning disability rates, in 2003 15.9% of new cases presented Grade II disability, whereas in 2006, the figure dropped to 8.5%, indicating that new cases are being detected earlier. From what I understand, there is no social stigma attached to leprosy in Timor-Leste culture, so that people with the disease do not suffer discrimination.

In a salutary reminder of the current security situation in the country, the UN vehicle that came to pick me up the next morning arrived with



Inspecting damage to a UN vehicle

cracks in the back window after it had apparently been stoned. My first call of the day was on Vice Prime Minister and Minister for Health Dr. Rui Maria de Araujo, whom I met on my previous visit in 2005. He said that the worsening security situation was a major political problem but that health services were being maintained somehow. On my next visit, he said, we should go back to Oecusse Enclave. Oecusse is a part of Timor-Leste but is actually located in West Timor, which belongs to Indonesia. The PR in Oecusse is 12.7, which compares unfavorably with Timor-Leste's other 12 provinces, where the PR ranges from 0.4 to 4.6. I urged the minister to do all he could to keep leprosy services on track.

I departed from Timor-Leste that evening for Indonesia. Only later did I learn that all roads in Dili were closed, and international flights diverted, shortly after I left. It was another indication, if one was needed, that Timor-Leste's difficulties are unlikely to be resolved any time soon.

## INDONESIA (FEBRUARY 13-15)

On February 13, I called on Indonesia's Health Minister Siti Fadilah Supari. Indonesia has already achieved elimination, but it needs to make efforts to sustain the achievement, which I requested of the minister. I also asked that more be done to end discrimination.

Next, I met with Mr. Abdul Hakim Garuda Nusantara, who chairs the Indonesian National Human Rights Commission. The commission, which is independent of the government and parliament, has 20 members. When I talked to him about the social discrimination that people affected by leprosy face, the chairman candidly admitted that the commission had not paid much attention to leprosy before now. He promised that he would promptly launch an investigation and take steps to improve the situation. We also discussed plans to hold a workshop sponsored by the commission. This was a very significant visit because it linked the Indonesian Human Rights Commission to action that can be taken to alleviate discrimination against people affected by leprosy.

In the evening, I met with Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Social Welfare Aburizal Bakrie. A former businessman who holds a 5th dan in karate, he is an extremely cheerful and dynamic character. He agreed how important it was to have a long-term strategy to



Indonesia's HM  
Siti Fadilah Supari



Mr. Abdul Hakim Garuda  
Nusantara