

Reference

* Neglected tropical diseases affect an estimated 1 billion people, primarily poor populations living in tropical or subtropical climates. NTDs kill, impair or permanently disable millions of people each year, often resulting in life-long physical pain, social stigmatization and abuse. (Source: WHO)



Attending the partners' meeting on neglected tropical diseases in Jakarta

educate people about leprosy through public education, and also emphasized the immediate impact that poster campaigns can have. It transpires that the minister's son owns a television station, and the minister urged me to appear on TV and deliver my message. Arrangements were promptly made for me to record an interview the next day.

February 14 was the opening day of a two-day Meeting of Partners on Tropical Diseases Targeted for Elimination/Eradication* organized by the WHO's Regional Office for South-east Asia. The WHO is currently focusing on 13 neglected tropical diseases — among them leprosy, lymphatic filariasis, onchocerciasis, buruli ulcer and yaws — which are characterized as NTDs because they don't receive the same attention as other diseases like malaria and dengue fever and tend to be neglected by policy makers. This was the second such gathering of experts; the first took place in India in 2005. I was invited to deliver the keynote address and discuss the lessons to be drawn from the global leprosy elimination program.

I said I believed that the success of the elimination campaign was due to cooperation between the WHO, NGOs, pharmaceutical companies and donors; to the setting of a numerical target for elimination (less than 1 case per 10,000 population); and to the setting of a deadline (the end of 2000, later extended to the end of 2005). Speaking as a layman, I also urged that more emphasis be placed on the social aspects of leprosy, namely the stigma and discrimination that surrounds the disease, and that leprosy be seen in a human rights context.

In the afternoon, I recorded the TV interview

that had been arranged the previous day. ANTV, a nationwide commercial network, sent a camera crew to the conference site. I delivered my three simple but extremely important messages, namely, that leprosy is curable, treatment is free, and social discrimination has no place.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, I arranged for Adi Josep, one of the signatories of the Global Appeal 2007 to end stigma and discrimination against people affected by leprosy, to appear with me. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and had there been more time I would like to have taken Adi with me to call on government figures and have them shake hands on camera. That is often the most effective way to allay people's fears about leprosy.

Late in the afternoon, I met with a group of a dozen people affected by leprosy, who had gathered in Jakarta from around the country for a meeting the next day. Organized by Adi, it was to be the first-ever meeting in Indonesia of persons affected by leprosy. I spent about 30 minutes with the group, who ranged in age from their 20s through their 40s and 50s and were determined to make their voices heard.

In recent years, I have been especially interested in helping such groups in India and elsewhere to get organized and speak out, and I was delighted to see the beginnings of such a movement in Indonesia, too. I told the group that I respected their courage and hoped that their meeting would earn a place in history.

Although my time in Timor-Leste and Indonesia was short, my meetings there reminded me again of my obligations as Goodwill Ambassador, and strengthened my resolve to fight on for a world without leprosy. ■



Mr. Aburizal Bakrie



Mr. Adi Yosep