

## Press Release

# WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination Recognized with WHO Director-General's Award for Global Health at 75<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly

## Ambassador will call on countries to strengthen efforts against leprosy in meetings with delegations attending WHA

TOKYO, May 22, 2022/PRNewswire/ --WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination Yohei Sasakawa arrives in Geneva, Switzerland on May 23 for the 75<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly, where he will call for renewed efforts against leprosy that have been disrupted by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the opening of the assembly on May 22, he was presented in his absence with the WHO Director-General's Award for Global Health in recognition of his contribution to advancing global health. In a short video message, Sasakawa expressed his gratitude for the prestigious award and invited delegates to join him on the last mile to end leprosy.

During his stay in Geneva, Sasakawa will be meeting with delegations from 18 countries, including those from India, Brazil, Indonesia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bangladesh and Ethiopia that are among the WHO's 23 priority countries for leprosy, to encourage their further efforts against the disease and the discrimination it causes. (See list of the scheduled meetings below.)

Sasakawa, who is the chairman of The Nippon Foundation, has been a regular visitor to the World Health Assembly in his capacity as WHO Goodwill Ambassador, but this will be his first participation since 2018.



"Don't forget leprosy" campaign rally by students in Tenali, India with banner featuring Mr. Sasakawa's photo. (2022/2/23)

Due to the spread of the novel coronavirus, activities against leprosy in many countries have had to be scaled back. This has led to delays in detection and treatment of new cases, reflected in a 37% year-on-year decrease in new cases globally in 2020. If treatment is delayed, leprosy can cause progressive disability, and there are concerns that the number of patients with disabilities will increase in the future because of the disruption to leprosy services caused by the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also dealt a serious economic blow to individuals and communities of persons affected by leprosy, many of whom were already in a vulnerable position.

In light of the situation, Sasakawa initiated a “Don’t forget leprosy” campaign in August 2021 to send the message that leprosy and those affected by the disease must not be overlooked even amid the COVID pandemic. The campaign was scheduled to run until the end this month, but has been extended for another year due to the ongoing impact of the pandemic.

### **Scheduled meetings**

**Asia and Oceania:** Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Myanmar, Nepal

**Africa:** Angola, Comoros, Cote d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan

**Latin America:** Brazil

### **About WHO Goodwill Ambassador Yohei Sasakawa**

Since his appointment as WHO Goodwill Ambassador Leprosy Elimination in 2001, Nippon Foundation Chairman Yohei Sasakawa has intensified his work for a world without leprosy and problems associated with the disease. He likens leprosy work to the two wheels of a motorcycle—the front wheel represents efforts to eliminate the disease and the rear wheel efforts to end discrimination. Both wheels must turn at the same time if we are to make progress toward a leprosy-free world. A frequent visitor to leprosy-endemic countries, he attaches importance to field visits because he believes solutions are to be found alongside problems. Over the past two decades he has traveled to over 100 countries, where he meets with leaders to seek their political commitment to leprosy elimination and makes a point of talking directly with persons affected by leprosy to learn about their lives and familiarize himself with their concerns.

### **About Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen’s Disease) Initiative**

The Initiative (<https://sasakawaleprosyinitiative.org/>) is a strategic alliance between WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination Yohei Sasakawa (<https://www.nippon-foundation.or.jp/en/who/message/profile>), The Nippon Foundation (

foundation.or.jp/en) and Sasakawa Health Foundation (<https://www.shf.or.jp/en>) for achieving a world without leprosy and problems related to the disease. Since 1975, The Nippon Foundation and Sasakawa Health Foundation have supported the national leprosy programs of endemic countries through the WHO, with support totaling some US\$200 million to date. In cooperation with the Japanese government and other partners, the foundations have played an important role in advocating with the United Nations, helping to secure a 2010 UN General Assembly resolution on elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members and the appointment of a UN Special Rapporteur on leprosy by the UN Human Rights Council in 2017.

### **About Leprosy**

Leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, is an infectious disease that mainly affects the skin and peripheral nerves. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, around 200,000 cases were newly reported each year. Leprosy is curable with multidrug therapy, but left untreated can result in permanent disability. An estimated 3 to 4 million people in the world today are thought to be living with some form of disability as a result of leprosy. Although completely curable, many myths and misunderstandings surround the disease. In various parts of the world, patients, those who have been treated and cured, and even their family members continue to be stigmatized. The discrimination they face limits their opportunities for education, employment and full participation in society.

#### Contact

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