

Press Release

2024 Global Appeal Calls for Well-Informed Public to 'Break Chains of Discrimination' against Leprosy

TOKYO, Feb1, 2024/ -- Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen's Disease) Initiative has partnered with the World Health Organization to co-host the launch of the 2024 Global Appeal to end stigma and discrimination against persons affected by leprosy at WHO headquarters in Geneva on January 31, 2024.

Taking part in the ceremony were Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO Director-General, and Yohei Sasakawa, the WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination and Chairman of The Nippon Foundation.

This year's appeal calls on people to learn the facts about leprosy, share accurate information and create a world where no one is left behind because of a treatable disease. "Let us break the chains of discrimination, work toward a leprosy-free world, and ensure dignity and care for everyone affected by this disease," the appeal says.

The text was read by Anushka Sarna from India and Ahlula Moyo from South Africa, children of WHO staff members based in Geneva.



Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (right), the WHO Director-General, and Yohei Sasakawa (left), the WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination and Chairman of The Nippon Foundation, look on during the reading of the 2024 Global Appeal.

The 2024 Global Appeal is the 19th in a series of annual appeals dating back to 2006. An initiative of WHO Goodwill Ambassador Sasakawa, the appeal is launched on or near World Leprosy Day, which is marked on the last Sunday in January.

Each appeal has been endorsed by influential individuals or organizations who support its call end to discrimination against persons affected by leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease. To date, the list of supporters includes Nobel Peace Prize laureates, the International Bar Association, the World Medical Association and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. This year, the WHO has joined the list.

The launch ceremony began with a Stradivarius Mini-Concert featuring outstanding young violinists Giuseppe Gibonni and Rino Yoshimoto.

In a video message, the UN Special Rapporteur on the elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy, Dr. Beatriz Miranda Galarza, said there is an urgent need to establish a system of support and care, grounded in human rights, given the fact there are some 200,000 new cases of leprosy reported each year and millions of people living with disability due to leprosy. "Guaranteeing access to a high-quality support and care system is not only a human rights obligation, but also a condition to ensure the elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their families," she said.

Dr. Roderico H. Ofrin, the WHO Representative in India, which reports the highest number of cases in the world, said in a video message that India's five-year National Strategic Plan and Roadmap for Leprosy, launched in 2023, prioritizes combating stigma and ensuring the protection of the human rights of persons affected by leprosy. A critical component of this plan is to repeal all remaining discriminatory laws at the national and sub-national levels, he said, and it also includes the provision of psychological care and counselling to promote mental health.

Also contributing a video message was Dr. Bardan Jung Rana, the WHO Representative in Bangladesh, which has the fifth-highest number of leprosy cases in the world. He noted that at national leprosy conferences in 2019 and 2023, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had called for Bangladesh to achieve zero leprosy by 2030, and Dr. Bardan expressed willingness to work with the government and the private sector to realize this goal.

In a dialogue between Director-General Tedros and Goodwill Ambassador Sasakawa, the latter noted that the WHO and Sasakawa Leprosy Initiative had been collaborating on

leprosy elimination for some 50 years, and that working on one particular cause for this long is quite rare. "There has to be an outcome from this long collaboration," he said.

Dr. Tedros said that the WHO's Global Leprosy (Hansen's disease) Strategy 2021-2030 clearly sets out what needs to be done to achieve zero leprosy, and that the WHO will do everything to support countries in implementing it. He emphasized that promoting community cooperation and eliminating stigma and discrimination through a people-centered approach will contribute to early diagnosis and treatment and prevent disability.

Following the Global Appeal, Goodwill Ambassador Sasakawa was due to travel Tanzania, where he plans to climb Mount Kilimanjaro from February 7 in support of the "Don't Forget Leprosy" campaign.

About Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen's Disease) Initiative

The Initiative is a strategic alliance between WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination Yohei Sasakawa, The Nippon Foundation and Sasakawa Health Foundation 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, which disrupted case-finding activities, over 200,000 new cases were being reported annually. Leprosy is curable with multidrug therapy, but left untreated can result in permanent disability. Many myths and misconceptions 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.