

***Opening Remarks***

***by***

***Dr Samlee Plianbangchang  
Regional Director, WHO/SEARO***

***at the  
Annual Meeting of The Nippon Foundation-  
Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation Advisory  
Board with WHO/SEARO***

***WHO/SEARO, New Delhi, India  
12-13 October 2004***

**Opening Remarks at the Inaugural Session by Dr Samlee Plianbangchang, Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia Region at the Annual Meeting of TNF-SMHF Advisory Board with WHO/SEARO, 12-13 October 2004**

Professor Kenzo Kiikuni, Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation;

Dr Yo Yuasa, Executive and Medical Director, Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation;

Dr Hiroyoshi Endo, Director, Control, Prevention and Eradication, Communicable Diseases Programme, WHO/HQ;

Distinguished Members of the Board;

Colleagues and friends;

Ladies and gentlemen;

- I have great pleasure to warmly welcome you all to WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia.
- On behalf of WHO, I wish to place on record our deep appreciation and gratitude to The Nippon Foundation and Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation for their generous and sustained support to the global elimination of leprosy.
- This is the third successive year that the SEA Regional Office of WHO has the privilege to host this meeting; and we wish to thank Prof Kiikuni for choosing New Delhi as the venue for the meeting once again.

- The presence of our WHO colleagues from Headquarters and Regional Offices for Africa, Western Pacific and the Americas provides us another opportunity to deliberate together on action plan that will be submitted for consideration of the Foundation.
- It is the opportunity that we will share information; learn from our experiences; assess our strengths and weaknesses; and jointly plan for our future course of action.
- While our unfinished agenda remains, leprosy elimination will become another success story in the field of public health, if we continue to work hard together as we have done.
- Thanks to the advent of multidrug therapy (MDT).
- Within a span of about 20 years, the global caseload of leprosy had declined from 12 million to just about 0.5 million in 2003.
- In 1985, there were 122 countries with a prevalence of more than 1 case per 10,000 population.
- By the end of 2003, 113 countries had achieved the Leprosy elimination goal as set by the World Health Assembly; only nine countries are yet to attain this goal.

- This includes India, Nepal and Timor-Leste in this Region; another six countries in Africa, and one in the Americas.
- In addition, few island countries in the Pacific with the population less than 1 million are yet to achieve the elimination goal.
- In South-East Asia Region, I am glad to inform the meeting that vigorous efforts are sustained to ensure achievement of the goal in all countries by December 2005.
- As we are aware, India in 2003 accounted for 87% of the prevalence and 91% of the new case detections in the Region.
- Therefore, India is the key to our success.
- We will need to continue to accord the highest priority attention to the situation in India.
- The prevalence rate in this country, as of March 2004 was 2.4/10,000 population; we hope to successfully accelerate the progress within the next year.
- We will have to double our efforts in the other two countries also, i.e. Nepal and Timor-Leste, both with prevalence rate of 2.4/10,000 population, the same as that in India.

- Nonetheless, the other countries which have achieved the elimination target at national level still need our technical and financial back up.
- This is to reach a uniform reduction of prevalence rate throughout the country, progressing from national to sub-national level elimination.
- Ladies and gentlemen; The WHO Leprosy Programme has received generous grants from The Nippon Foundation and Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation since 1975.
- These grants had enabled WHO to provide leprosy drugs free of charge to all affected Member States, especially during the period from 1995-2000.
- Our grateful thanks are extended to The Nippon Foundation and Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation.
- We also thank Novartis which helped continue this free drug supply from 2000 onwards.
- The partnership between The Nippon Foundation and Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation and WHO has been increasingly strengthened.

- We hope that this strong collaboration will continue until the elimination target at sub-national levels are reached in all countries; and ultimately we reach the goal of a leprosy-free world.
- We also greatly appreciate the tireless efforts of Mr Yohei Sasakawa for successful advocacy to gain a high-level interest on leprosy issue.
- This is especially during the 56<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights held in August this year.
- The Sub-Commission adopted a resolution on 'Discrimination Against Leprosy Victims and Their Families'.
- This is yet another milestone and achievement in our fight against leprosy and the needless stigma attached to the victims of the disease.
- Colleagues; I hope your two-day deliberations will be productive as usual, and lead to an action plan for 2005.
- I also hope that this plan would receive favourable consideration from The Nippon Foundation and Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation.

- We in this office will do our best to facilitate the efficient and effective conduct of the meeting.
- Our Acting Director for Communicable Diseases, Dr Jai Narain and Regional Advisor on Leprosy, Dr Derek Lobo will always be at the disposal of the meeting.
- Finally, I wish the meeting fruitful discussions and successful conclusions; and I wish you all a pleasant stay in Delhi.

Thank you.