

Opening Remarks

By
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At

Inter-Regional Meeting of Global Leprosy Programme

WHO/SEARO, New Delhi, India
13-14 March 2006

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**DR SAMLEE PLIANBANGCHANG
REGIONAL DIRECTOR, WHO SOUTH-EAST ASIA**

Colleagues, Distinguished participants,

It is with great pleasure that I warmly welcome you all to the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia. And, I welcome you all to the Inter-regional Meeting of the Global Leprosy Programme. This is the first meeting of this kind since the Global Leprosy Programme was relocated to South -East Asia Regional Office last July.

Actually, we should have had this meeting some time ago. We just got the opportunity now. The primary purpose of the meeting is to deliberate on how best we can ensure our efficiency in the management of the Global Leprosy Programme. This is particularly the efficiency of communication between the Global Leprosy Programme and the Regional Programmes. This will take us a long way to be more effective in sustaining leprosy control activities in all endemic countries in the world.

Following the announcement by the Director-General in February 2005, the Global Leprosy Programme was relocated to this Regional Office. WHO/SEARO will do everything possible to ensure the efficient operation of the Global Programme.

It should be remembered that the Programme will continue to maintain its global mandate to serve all Regions of WHO, as required. We are happy to have with us Dr Vijay Kumar Pannikar, and Dr Myo Thet Htoon, the two international professional staff members of the programme.

This is another example in the history of the Organization of a global programme being relocated outside Geneva. In essence, this is a unique experiment which the Director-General and I, among many others, would like to see as another successful example. The example of moving global programmes closer to where need is the greatest.

The implementation of the Leprosy Control Programme is now at the stage where the success of the elimination strategy has reduced the disease burden to very low levels. Also, there is a steady declining trend in new case detection. This has happened globally in the majority of Member States.

Most countries in the world have reached the elimination goal, while some others still need more time to accomplish their work. It is, therefore, important for us to review the past achievements and plan to tackle the remaining challenges.

The priority now is to support the national programmes in integrating leprosy control activities within their health systems, especially at the primary level. This way, in future, new cases will be able to easily access proper treatment and care at the nearest health facilities.

Keeping this in mind, the leprosy control programmes have to focus, as priority activities, on sustaining gains achieved from the elimination efforts. At the same time, attempts will have to be made to further reduce the disease burden.

This is especially so with regard to the improvement of quality of care; including the elimination of social stigma, and the promotion of human rights of the affected people.

It is a formidable challenge indeed, as the services will have to continue being fully in place as long as new cases keep appearing. Therefore, we need to enhance our efforts in resource mobilization for supporting the country programmes with a long-term vision. The Nippon/Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation has provided the major back-up to WHO in this area since 1994. It is expected that they will continue doing the same, especially in the light of the new Strategy to sustain and further improve the services.

However, the level of funding from the Foundation is likely to be reduced in future. Therefore, we have no other option, than to expand our donor base.

We have to work closely with all our partners in the spirit of mutual trust, respect and understanding. At the same time, we need to find ways to keep leprosy on the long-term agenda of WHO. We have to seek additional resource support from all concerned in WHO.

With the Director General, I and my colleagues will do all we can to secure such support for the global programme. I trust that you will thoroughly discuss these and other issues during the course of this meeting.

Your deliberations and follow-up actions will certainly help improve our communication; and enhance the efficiency of our collaboration with all partners. These will ensure that we will be able to continue assisting endemic countries to effectively sustain leprosy control activities.

We will be able to help ensure quality services to all people affected by leprosy, and its sequelae. I extend my best wishes for a very fruitful meeting, and look forward to the outcome.