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WHO News Release
International Leprosy Summit

WHO warns against complacency in the fight against leprosy

26 July 2013: The fight against leprosy has made great progress in the past two decades but complacency may now be threatening the last push towards a world free of this debilitating disease, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned on the opening day of the International Leprosy Summit.

The three-day summit (24-26 July), organized by WHO and the Nippon Foundation, brought global experts and health ministers from eight countries to discuss the current leprosy situation and strategies for further reducing the disease burden and realizing a leprosy-free world.

Since 1995, WHO and partners have been providing free multidrug therapy (MDT) to leprosy patients worldwide. Nearly 16 million people have been cured of leprosy and more than 10 million people have been prevented from developing visible deformities. But in many countries where the disease is endemic, new case-detection rates have been either static or showing increases. In 2012, there were 232,850 new cases of leprosy reported worldwide which equates to one new case every 2 minutes. 7 out of every 10 new cases is a child. Leprosy can be cured with medicines within 6–12 months but misinformation is common. The disease continues to be shrouded in stigma with communities shunning patients even after they are cured.

In Timor-Leste, Leprosy was declared eliminated as a public health problem in 2011. The elimination of the disease means that there is less than one leprosy case for every 10,000 members of the population. However, the disease continues to affect people living in hard to reach areas, such as border areas and urban slums. The latest figures show that there were 82 cases of Leprosy recorded between January and March 2013 in Timor-Leste. 34 of these cases were found in Oecusse, with a significant number also detected in Dili, Bobonoaro and Baucau.

Dr Samlee Plianbangchang, Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia said “While we’ve covered a lot of ground in reducing the disease burden in all endemic countries, there is no room for complacency. The final battle against leprosy is yet to be won. Our challenge is to sustain the quality of leprosy services and to ensure that all persons affected by leprosy, wherever they live, have an equal opportunity to be diagnosed early and treated by competent health workers.” During the Summit, Mr Yohei Sasakawa, chairman of the Nippon Foundation and WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination, committed US\$20 million for the next five years and called on others to contribute further resources, expertise and political commitments to the fight against leprosy.

In order to bridge current gaps, and ensure that leprosy work continues on the path to further reduce the global disease burden, more needs to be done. WHO is advocating prompt treatment with multidrug therapy and allocating more resources to facilitate early case detection. This can be accomplished by training existing health workers to recognize and treat leprosy, which will help detect new cases earlier and remove leprosy's status as a "special" or "feared" disease. Community awareness is also important in encouraging health seeking behaviour among the general public and addressing discrimination and stigma remain a huge issue for leprosy-affected persons. WHO currently provides technical support to Ministry of Health in these areas. Trainings for health workers on early case detection, management and treatment have been conducted in Ermera and Covalima earlier this year, advocacy campaigns have been run in Manatutuo and Dili and further advocacy and training for health staff is planned for Oecusse in August, 2013.

The Bangkok Declaration, adopted during the summit, is a recognition that further work needs to be done and reaffirms WHO and partners' resolve to achieve a leprosy-free world.

What: International Leprosy Summit

When: 24 - 26 July 2013

Where: Hotel Dusit Thani, Bangkok, Thailand

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