

PRESENTATION BY  
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ELIMINATION OF LEPROSY

On behalf of the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, and on my own behalf, I am pleased to welcome you and read her message to this Congress.

"It gives me great pleasure to greet all of you who have come from different parts of the world to attend this 15th International Leprosy Congress, organized by the International Leprosy Association (ILA). The year 1998 marks the 50th year of official relations between ILA and WHO, and I would like to take this opportunity to place on record our deep appreciation of the collaboration between ILA and WHO which has been so productive and mutually beneficial through the years.

"Leprosy, as a disease with a sinister potential to devastate the entire lives of affected persons without actually killing them, is clearly a reflection of the extreme underdevelopment which still persists in many parts of the world. All the same, it is possible today to fight the disease successfully. Leprosy is a relatively weak enemy—it takes years to evolve, it is only feebly infectious, and today it is highly amenable to treatment. Moreover, it is not particularly difficult to diagnose and the weapons we have to treat it in the form of multidrug therapy (MDT) are highly effective in curing the disease and in preventing drug resistance. Further, a large number of organizations, national and international, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), are fully engaged in supporting leprosy work in endemic countries. On top of all this, we have today a strong political commitment at the international level, and also at the national level in most endemic countries, to eliminate the disease as a public

health problem by the year 2000, that is to say, to reduce the prevalence of leprosy to less than 1 case per 10,000 population, as set out by a resolution of the World Health Assembly in 1991. In spite of this we still have hundreds of thousands of patients remaining undetected and untreated, and millions more affected by the physical and social consequences of the disease even after they are cured. We cannot afford to allow this situation to continue, no matter how gratifying it is that the leprosy situation has improved immeasurably in recent years. It is true that the disease burden in public health terms has been brought down by more than 85% in the past 15 years and this, in itself, is no mean achievement. However, what remains to be accomplished in order to achieve the goal of elimination of leprosy is the most difficult and challenging part. Therefore, let us not sit on our laurels, become complacent and let the historic opportunity of bringing about a leprosy-free world slip away from us. Let us recognize the urgent need for all of us to work together to ensure that the unfinished task is completed as soon as possible.

"Leprosy is not merely a health issue—it is also a human rights issue. Leprosy-affected persons, even after they are cured, still face violations of their human rights, and they deserve a far better treatment from society than they receive at present. What they need and what they should demand are their inalienable human rights, and certainly not just charity. Generations of leprosy-affected men and women have been exposed to cruel stigma and ostracism. I sincerely hope that we shall put an end to that injustice once and for all. In this connection, I am very happy to learn that many

leprosy-affected persons are participating in this Congress as equal partners to voice their concerns and hopes.

“From the point of view of the World Health Organization, we want to see an end to leprosy in the world as soon as possible, both as a public health problem and as a human and social problem. Toward this end, I want to assure you that WHO will continue

to give a high priority to leprosy and will provide the necessary leadership. WHO is also keen to continue and strengthen its collaboration with leprosy agencies everywhere, including NGOs, and is firmly committed to the objective that is the main theme of this Congress, namely, working toward a world without leprosy.

“I wish the Congress every success.”