

Press Release

WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination Has Audience with Pope Francis

Pope Supports Continued Efforts Against Leprosy, Reflects on Tragedy of War

TOKYO, Jan. 27, 2023 /PRNewswire/ -- WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination Yohei Sasakawa had an audience with His Holiness Pope Francis at the Vatican on January 26, 2023, during which he requested the Pope's support in eliminating leprosy and the prejudice and discrimination associated with the disease.



His Holiness Pope Francis and Mr. Yohei Sasakawa, WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination

(Photo by Vatican Media via Vatican Pool/Getty Images)

In response, the Pope expressed his gratitude for the work of the Goodwill Ambassador, who also serves as Chairman of The Nippon Foundation, and said it was necessary to continue activities against leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, encouraged by the fact it is curable.

Earlier in the week, Sasakawa attended a two-day international symposium on Hansen's disease titled "Leave No One Behind." It was the second symposium on Hansen's disease to be held at the Vatican since 2016 and was co-hosted by French Raoul Follereau Foundation, Italian Association Amici di Raoul Follereau and Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen's Disease) Initiative, in collaboration with the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

Pope Francis sent a message to participants on the opening day, thanking them for their commitment and saying, "We must not ignore this disease, which unfortunately still afflicts many people, especially in the most disadvantaged social contexts." He added that the upcoming 70th World Leprosy Day, celebrated on Jan. 29, was "a fitting occasion to try to renew our commitment to building an inclusive society, that leaves no-one at the margins."

During the private audience, Pope Francis, who visited the Japanese city of Nagasaki in 2019, produced a photograph taken after the atomic bombing of the city in August 1945. It shows a young boy waiting in line at a crematorium, carrying his dead sibling on his back.

"War is a tragedy," Pope Francis said. "War must never happen again."

At the end of their meeting, the Goodwill Ambassador asked the Pope to pose for a photograph next to a banner reading "Don't Forget Hansen's Disease", a campaign that Sasakawa initiated in 2021 to ensure that leprosy is not overlooked even amid the coronavirus pandemic. "This one photograph will help persons affected by leprosy all over the world," he told the Pope.

Speaking afterward, Sasakawa commented: "It is clear how much warmth and love Pope Francis has for the oppressed. He has given me great strength and filled me with courage in my work against leprosy and the stigma and discrimination it causes."

The photo that Pope Francis showed the Goodwill Ambassador: In the run-up to New Year 2018, the Pope had cards of the photo printed, instructing that "The fruit of war" be written on the back above his signature, together with details of the image, including the description: "The young boy's sadness is expressed only in his gesture of biting his lips which are oozing blood." The photo was taken by U.S. Marine photographer Joe O'Donnell in Nagasaki in 1945.

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. An estimated 3 to 4 million people are thought to be living with some form of disability as a result of leprosy. Although completely curable, many myths and misunderstandings 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.

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.

Contact

Sasakawa Health Foundation

Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen's Disease) Initiative

Communication officer: Chiemi Sanga

Email: c_sanga@shf.or.jp

Phone: 81-70-4509-4213

Website: <https://sasakawaleprosyinitiative.org/>