

Press Release

Sasakawa Leprosy Initiative to Boost Support for Indonesia

**Yohei Sasakawa, WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination,
Makes Announcement on World Leprosy Day 2025**

TOKYO, Jan 25, 2025/ On the occasion of World Leprosy Day 2025 on January 26, WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination Yohei Sasakawa announces that the Sasakawa Leprosy Initiative (SLI) will increase its support to Indonesia to combat the stigma and discrimination associated with leprosy and to promote early diagnosis and treatment of the disease.

Leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, is an infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium leprae* that mainly affects the skin and peripheral nerves. For much of its long history, the cause was unknown, giving rise to many myths and misconceptions.

Since the introduction of WHO-recommended multidrug therapy (MDT) in 1981, some 18 million people worldwide have been cured of leprosy. However, around 200,000 new cases are reported each year, and many people affected by leprosy and their families continue to face rejection based on outdated stereotypes and superstitions.

After India and Brazil, Indonesia has the third highest number of cases of leprosy in the world. In 2023, it recorded 14,376 new cases, including 1,179 children. In addition, 826 people, including 21 children, had visible disabilities at the time of diagnosis, indicating that they were diagnosed late.



Yohei Sasakawa visiting a patient at Sumberglagah Hospital, Mojokerto Regency, East Java

“Indonesia is one of the most important countries in the fight against leprosy,” said Sasakawa. “Overcoming stigma and discrimination and promoting early diagnosis and treatment there will be key to accelerating the world’s progress toward zero leprosy.”

He said that from this year, SLI will intensify its support for Indonesia, working with government agencies, civil society organizations, research institutes, the media and others to raise awareness of leprosy and encourage people to seek treatment if they suspect they have the

disease.

SLI already supports the Indonesian Ministry of Health's national leprosy program through the WHO, as well as providing assistance to NGOs and PerMaTa, an organization of persons affected by leprosy.

"Leprosy is a treatable disease. With appropriate and timely treatment, disabilities associated with leprosy can be prevented," said Al Kadri, PerMaTa's chairman. "But fear of prejudice and discrimination means that many people go undiagnosed and untreated."

Indonesia has a comprehensive strategy to tackle leprosy, according to Health Minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin, including public education campaigns, collaboration with tuberculosis initiatives to strengthen case detection and treatment, and support for social rehabilitation. "Through these measures, we aim to achieve a leprosy-free Indonesia, where everyone can live with dignity," he said.

As part of its support for Indonesia's efforts against the disease, SLI plans to identify several districts and work with local government agencies, healthcare providers and others to develop "zero leprosy" projects that can serve as models for the whole country.

About WHO Goodwill Ambassador Yohei Sasakawa

As chairman of The Nippon Foundation, Yohei Sasakawa focuses on finding solutions to humanitarian and other problems in many parts of the world, especially in Asia and Africa. For more than half a century, he has been working to eliminate leprosy, serving as WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination since 2001, and Japanese Government Goodwill Ambassador for the Human Rights of Persons Affected by Leprosy since 2007.

About Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen's Disease) Initiative

Sasakawa Leprosy Initiative is a strategic alliance of WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination Yohei Sasakawa, the Sasakawa Health Foundation and The Nippon Foundation to realize a leprosy-free world. Since 1975, it has supported governments in their fight against leprosy through the WHO, contributing more than US\$200 million. It has also made significant contributions to support organizations of persons affected by leprosy and has been instrumental in bringing leprosy to the attention of the United Nations, resulting in the adoption of several UN resolutions on the elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members.

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