

WHO Goodwill Ambassador Issues Rallying Cry to Accelerate International Efforts to Eliminate Leprosy: "The Last Mile Starts Now"

TOKYO, May 22, 2026 /PRNewswire/ -- Yohei Sasakawa has issued a rallying cry for the international community to step up efforts for a world without leprosy. "The last mile starts now," he said, addressing a reception held in Geneva on May 18 during the 79th World Health Assembly to mark his 25 years as an ambassador for leprosy elimination.

Hosted by the Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen's Disease) Initiative, the reception was attended by around 100 people, including health ministers of leprosy-endemic countries, WHO officials and Japanese government representatives.



WHO Goodwill Ambassador Yohei Sasakawa (left) and WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stand in front of a "Don't Forget Leprosy" banner featuring the new slogan "The Last Mile Starts Now."

Separately, Sasakawa also met with WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Regional Directors, and the health ministers of the 16 priority countries for leprosy, including India, Brazil, and Indonesia, to exchange views on strengthening international cooperation in order to realize a world without leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease.

Although significant progress has been made in fighting the disease over the past 25 years, approximately 180,000 new cases are still reported each year, indicating that transmission of leprosy continues. People who contract leprosy still face stigma and discrimination, even though the disease is curable.

The reception, which was held at the Palais de Nations, introduced Sasakawa's achievements as an ambassador for leprosy elimination. It also highlighted the need to raise awareness and understanding of leprosy, and to strengthen international cooperation and advocacy in support of future initiatives.

Sasakawa was first appointed as Special Ambassador to the Global Alliance for the Elimination of Leprosy in 2001. He subsequently became WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination, a role in which he has worked tirelessly both for the elimination of the disease and the discrimination it causes.

To date, he has visited 127 countries and logged over 3,700 days on overseas missions. In recent years, he has repeatedly engaged with the leaders of the major endemic countries—India, Brazil and Indonesia—to promote measures against the disease.

In his official address at the World Health Assembly Plenary Meeting, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stated: "I would like to recognize the leadership of Mr. Yohei Sasakawa, who is celebrating 25 years as the WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination. He is our longest-serving Goodwill Ambassador and is still running strong. Arigato gozaimasu."

Speaking at the reception, Sasakawa, who is honorary chair of The Nippon Foundation, thanked the WHO, governments, NGOs, health workers and organizations of persons affected by leprosy for their support over the past 25 years. He then said, "Even though leprosy is curable, many people still suffer from stigma and discrimination. The international community must strengthen its cooperation to tackle this issue, driven by a strong commitment to leaving no one behind."

Now 87 years old, Sasakawa expressed his belief that "problems and solutions are both found in the field" and said he was determined to work "body and soul" until every person affected by leprosy has been reached.

"The Last Mile Starts Now" is the latest iteration of the "Don't Forget Leprosy" campaign that Sasakawa launched during the COVID-19 pandemic. The campaign has helped to promote solidarity among stakeholders and keep leprosy in the spotlight.

It is based on the idea that the last mile of any journey is the most difficult, even as we make progress toward our destination of a leprosy-free world. As Sasakawa likes to say, "On a hundred-mile journey, the 99th mile should be considered halfway."

"With renewed determination to complete our task, we have chosen the slogan 'The Last Mile Starts Now' for the next phase of our campaign," he said. "I hope the international community will join me in taking further action so that we reach our shared goal of a world without leprosy and the problems it causes. The last mile starts now."

About Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen's Disease) Initiative

Sasakawa Leprosy Initiative is a strategic alliance of the WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination, the Sasakawa Health Foundation and The Nippon Foundation to realize a leprosy-free world. Since 1975, the initiative has, through the WHO, supported governments in their fight against leprosy, 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, and the appointment of a UN Rapporteur on leprosy in 2017.

About leprosy

Leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, is an infectious disease that primarily affects the skin and peripheral nerves. Approximately 180,000 new cases are reported worldwide every year. Although leprosy is curable, delayed diagnosis and treatment can result in permanent disability. Beyond the physical toll, many people who have experienced leprosy continue to face deep-seated stigma and systemic discrimination, which prevents them from participating fully in society.