
GLOBAL APPEAL TO END STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST PEOPLE AFFECTED BY LEPROSY

Leprosy is among the world's oldest and most dreaded diseases. Without an effective remedy for much of its long history, it often resulted in terrible deformity. It was also thought to be extremely communicable. Patients were abandoned, forced to live in isolation and discriminated against as social outcasts.

In the early 1980s, an effective cure for leprosy became available. Multidrug therapy has successfully treated over 14 million people to date. Contrary to popular belief, leprosy is extremely difficult to contract. With prompt diagnosis and treatment, it can be medically cured within 6 to 12 months without risk of deformity.

Yet fear of leprosy remains deep-rooted. Misguided notions endure — that it is “highly contagious,” “incurable” and “hereditary.” Some even regard it as “a divine punishment.”

Ignorance and misunderstanding result in prejudice and discriminatory attitudes that remain firmly implanted as custom and tradition.

Consequently, patients, cured persons and their entire families suffer stigma and discrimination. This limits their opportunities for education, employment and marriage, and restricts their access to public services.

Fearful that by speaking out they will invite further discrimination, for long years people affected by leprosy, including their families, have been cowed into silence. Such silence reinforces the stigma that surrounds them.

The world has remained indifferent to their plight for too long.

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and human rights.” This article, however, is meaningless to people affected by leprosy, who continue to suffer discrimination.

We appeal to the UN Commission on Human Rights to take up this matter as an item on its agenda, and request that it issue principles and guidelines for governments to follow in eliminating all discrimination against people affected by leprosy.

We further urge governments themselves to seriously consider this issue and act to improve the present situation with a sense of urgency.

Finally, we call on people all over the world to change their perception and foster an environment in which leprosy patients, cured persons and their families can lead normal lives free from stigma and discrimination.

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Oscar Arias
Former President of Costa Rica
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

Jimmy Carter
Former President of the United States of America
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

The Dalai Lama
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

El Hassan bin Talal
Prince of the Jordanian Hashemite Royal Dynasty

Václav Havel
Former President of the Czech Republic

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva
President of the Federative Republic of Brazil

Olusegun Obasanjo
President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

Mary Robinson
Former President of Ireland
Former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

Yobei Sasakawa
Chairman, The Nippon Foundation

Desmond Tutu
Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

R. Venkataraman
Former President of India

Elie Wiesel
President, The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate