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WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy urges countries not to overlook the diseaseÂ

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30th Anniversary of World Health Assembly Resolution and WHO Global Leprosy Strategy 2021-2030 are opportunities to accelerate efforts against the disease



As the 74th World Health Assembly (WHA) gets underway, WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination Yohei Sasakawa is urging countries not to overlook leprosy amid the global coronavirus pandemic and aim for zero leprosies. 30 years ago this month, the WHA adopted a resolution to eliminate leprosy as a public health problem.

The resolution adopted at the 44th WHA in 1991 called for the elimination of leprosy as a public health problem at the global level by the year 2000. 'Elimination' was defined as reaching a prevalence rate of the disease of less than 1 case per 10,000 population. This was achieved globally by the end of 2000 and almost all countries have since replicated that success at the national level.

In April, the fight against leprosy entered a new phase with the launch by the WHO of 'Towards Zero Leprosy: Global Leprosy (Hansen's disease) Strategy for 2021-2030.' The targets include zero leprosy patients in 120 countries and a 70 per cent decrease in new cases detected globally by 2030.

Yohei Sasakawa, who has visited over 100 countries since first being appointed Goodwill Ambassador in 2001, welcomes the new strategy and believes it will accelerate momentum towards a leprosy-free world. But he cautioned, "These are ambitious targets, so commitments from national governments will be required if they are to be achieved. I realise these are challenging times, but we mustn't allow leprosy to be overlooked amid COVID-19."

Goodwill Ambassador Sasakawa, who has been involved in efforts against leprosy for nearly half a century with The Nippon Foundation, the Japanese non-profit grant-making organisation he serves as chairman, said the 30th anniversary of the WHA resolution on eliminating leprosy is an appropriate moment to recall the spirit that brought countries together in a sense of common purpose against leprosy.